FINAL ISSUE. DON'T MISS THIS ONE!

AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG

PC PowerPlay

SINCE 1996

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29 INCREDIBLE YEARS

WE'D LIKE TO GIVE THANKS TO THE READERS AND ENTIRE TEAM AT PC POWERPLAY MAGAZINE

PC PowerPlay

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BEN MANSILL

This month
Finished the final level in *PC Gaming Magazine Publishing*, then relaxed deeply into his gaming chair, closed his eyes for a moment and smiled, before hitting Exit Game for the last time.

It's never nice or easy to say goodbye, but, sadly, it is indeed time to farewell PC PowerPlay.

This is the last issue of PCPP. For almost 30 years we've been sharing the gaming goodness with Australians, and we are all immensely proud of what we've achieved. For many of you, for a very long time, PC PowerPlay was the go-to source for all things PC gaming and gear. We shared our excitement, and we heard your passion in return. PC gaming is just the best damn thing there is, and we loved making every single page of this beautiful magazine, for you.

Thank you for being on this amazing ride with us. It was an honour. It was fun. We love you all.

BEN MANSILL
EDITOR
ben.mansill@futurenet.com

The PC PowerPlay team

FRASER BROWN

This month
Needed to correct his new subjects' grammar. It's 'Romani ite domum', not 'Romanes eunt domus'.

IAN EVENDEN

This month
Became a raffish Beef Baron, secretly smuggling in steaks under the nose of lawman Rex Banner.

JOSHUA WOLENS

This month
Built a colossal factory staffed by a million tiny robots. It's output? Whoopee cushions.

JACOB RIDLEY

This month
Built a collar from CPU fans that dramatically blows air through his hair at all times. Vogue!

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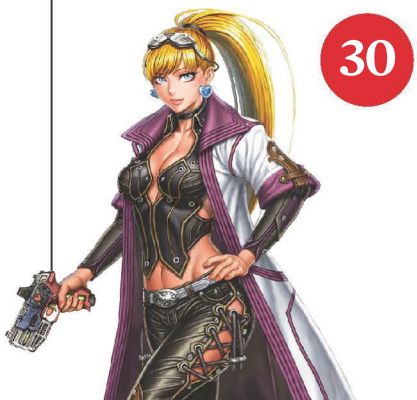

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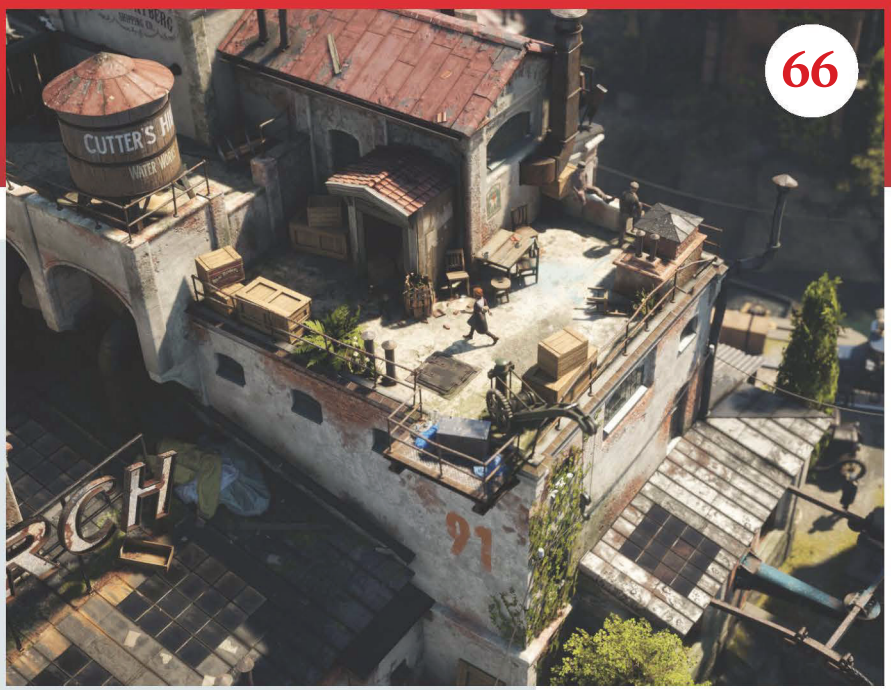

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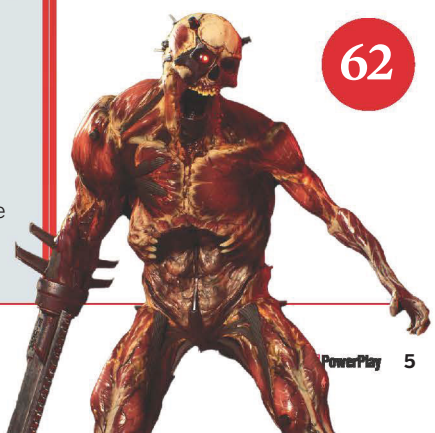


AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG

PC PowerPlay

SINCE 1996

YEARS OF GAMING GOODNESS

Founding and final Editor BEN MANSILL would like to say a few words...

It's tough to say goodbye. Especially when there's *almost* 30 years of amazing history in this story. But yes, the time has come and *PC PowerPlay* is bidding you farewell, and as you hold these pages, we know you're saying goodbye to us.

Thank you. Every one of you, whether you've been enjoying *PCPP* since the 1990s, or have only ever bought a handful of copies over the years. We appreciate you being part of this adventure more than words can say. Ever since we started doing this, our single goal was to share the incredible excitement of PC gaming. To us, every day something cool would come along and all we wanted to do was to tell you excitedly about what we'd found, and what we know.

We were your excitable friend that just had to grab you by the shoulders and enthuse at you, and know that when you got your hands on the latest greatest, that'd you'd be as excited as we are.

And we did that. For 30 fantastic years (well, technically 29 years, but close enough). For every single

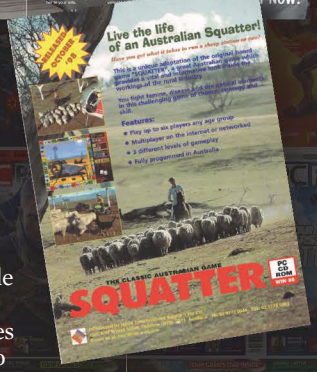
RIGHT: Issue 1 hit the stands in 1996 and at last Aussie PC gamers had a mag to call their own.

person that worked on *PCPP* the thrill, honour and responsibility was huge. We couldn't believe we got paid to be thrown deep into the games industry, often being the first people in the world to see something for the first time, then run back to our keyboards and rave all about it, so you could love it too.

A lot of people worked on *PCPP* over the years. You saw the same names appear for many years, and over time new writers came as others drifted on. Every single person making up the team loved being part of *PC PowerPlay*. I know that passion shone through on these pages, and I hope it was infectious. How could it not be? This is PC gaming dammit, and *PCPP* was there from very close to the beginning of it all. We bore witness to evolution in both games design, the tech behind it and the gear we played on. We saw an explosion of creativity and technology and covered it all.

Knowing that we faithfully recorded the thrilling history of PC gaming as it charged ever forwards makes us so proud. To everyone that ever wrote for *PCPP* over the years reading this – thank you.

PCPP isn't just people that review games, or editors that steer the ship. Behind the scenes there's always been a larger team that makes it all possible and kept *PCPP*'s heart beating. The production people kept the wheels turning and kept this machine running while jetlagged and hungover writers did their wording thing. They made sure *PCPP* was always on time and in every newsagent in the land. The finance and accounting people, the various big bosses we had all through the years, all of them loved this mag, and loved that you loved it, too.



Much credit for *PCPP*'s long life goes to the many commercial managers that have been part of this team for so long. They weren't just responsible for selling ads, either. These are the people that helped score many amazing competition prizes and giveaways, they're also behind the fancy cover upgrades that often ran. From the 110% energy and excitement of Julie-Ann Kwok, our first ad manager, to Cam Ferris, our current and last commercial guy who poured his heart into making *PCPP* a winner, and everyone in between, I thank you. We share the top podium step together.

Making *PCPP* beautiful to look at is entirely due to the talents of our art directors and designers. Malcolm 'Malcy Malc' Campbell wasn't just the first *PCPP* art director that got us off the ground, he was also the longest serving and it was his eye and care that gave *PCPP* a beauty that often stunned even us. Troy Coleman carried *PCPP* into its modern era and his fine touch and huge talent made damn sure that this here magazine will be remembered. It was a hell of a good-looking magazine.

ABOVE: Early gaming ads were quite something. And yes, we grew to love the Squatter ad, too

BELOW: Game reviews were the beating heart of *PCPP*, and our reviewers knew their stuff, were wise and oh so witty.

PCPP was made by too many people to list here, but I know each and every one of them loved being part of the crew, and that passion made for a hell of a team. Harry Maragos the cover CD dude, thanks for keeping us grounded. All the crazy people from the other games mags we published and all the hectic irresponsible fun we had – I still smile about our shenanigans. The office managers, the receptionists – you are all *PC PowerPlay*.

Beyond these walls are the great many PR and marketing people that gave us the access we needed to be the first with the big news. And the parties. Oh my. The parties. All forever memories to be treasured.

Each *PCPP* Editor brought something special, adding to *PCPP* while keeping it true to itself. Each gave their all and loved doing this. I asked former and particularly long-serving former Editor David Wildgoose to share a few thoughts on the following pages. David's eloquence captures how we all feel.

But it's you. Yes, you, that made *PCPP* complete. Not just because you kept buying this magazine, and thank you for that, but because we are the same. You love what we love. We all love PC gaming, and through *PCPP* we could love it together.

I launched this magazine, and now, here I am, penning the goodbye. This last act is something I always knew would eventually happen, and I'm sad but grateful I can be the one to thank you and everyone ever that made *PCPP* a legend.

Goodbye and thank you. We did good.

Ben Mansill

MORE THAN A MAGAZINE

Former Editor DAVID WILDGOOSE on our remarkable, wonderful run.

Oh, hello again. It's been two years, roughly, since I last wrote for *PC PowerPlay*, delivering a dew-eyed recollection of what was then 300 issues – a magnificent unbeaten triple-century, bat raised in triumph to the Members Stand – of Australia's number one PC games magazine. Now I'm back, two years and eleven issues later, to eulogise the death of Australia's last PC games magazine; the innings faltered, the tail didn't wag, and we trudge back to the pavilion, all out for 311.

I suspect Ben asked me to contribute here because of all the fine people to have written for *PC PowerPlay* over the last 30 years I think I may well have written the most. You may not have seen my name recently, but I was there for most of the first hundred issues, many of the second hundred, and at least several of the third. My history with *PC PowerPlay* is in large part my history with PC gaming. Memories of playing my favourite PC games are inevitably intertwined with memories of working on the magazine.

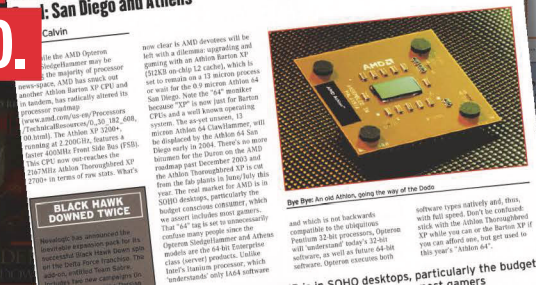
Memories of sitting alone in a dark office in Surry Hills, playing the original *Deus Ex* on my work PC until after midnight then walking home through Prince Alfred Park, its dimly lit expanse making me feel like I was sneaking through the outskirts of Liberty Island. Memories of travelling to E3 to meet with and interview developers like Warren Spector, Peter Molyneux, the Bioware doctors, Todd Howard, Will Wright and, sadly, now that I think about it, a vanishingly small number of women. Memories of being at E3 a few weeks after the original *Deus Ex* was released and deciding to spend half of my allocated Eidos appointment time playing the Liberty Island demo despite having already finished the game back home. Why are most of my memories still about *Deus Ex*?

Writing this piece has prompted me to recall not just Ion Storm's masterpiece, but the many talented people who wrote, edited, designed and illustrated so many pages over so many years; the office camaraderie forged during long nights on deadline, poring over copy and captions, and sometimes just as long nights at the pub afterwards, pouring something very different. No other job has been quite like it in that regard and I believe that sense of

"...take down an Orbb or three in the blink of an eye."

LEFT: We were there for all the legendary games that defined PC gaming.

BOTTOM: From the very beginning hardware was a key part of *PCPP*, because it's what we PC gamers love.



THERE WILL NEVER BE ANOTHER NEW WORD PUBLISHED UNDER THE PC POWERPLAY MASTHEAD. AND THAT BLOODY SUCKS.

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Learn More

community and common cause translated to the printed page more often than not.

But writing this has also just bummed me out. This is the last time I'll ever write for *PCPP*. When you turn the final page on this issue, the book will literally close forever. There will never be another new word published under the *PC PowerPlay* masthead. And that bloody sucks.

I didn't realise I would feel so sad at the loss of a magazine. *PCPP* hasn't been a part of my daily life for quite a few years now, and yet it's always there, forever lodged somewhere in the back of my mind – or, more literally, just a few feet away from where I'm writing this, on the middle shelf in my study where a dozen or so particularly significant issues still sit to this day. When I wrote that retrospective for the 300th issue, it was a celebration, a mark of how far we've come, a testament to the magazine's endurance. Today, it's something else, a shock of mortality, a hollowed-out bittersweet reminder that nothing lasts forever.

In a sense it's remarkable that *PC PowerPlay* lasted so long into the digital era in this dead-tree format you hold in your hands. A monthly magazine about PC gaming once made sense as a vehicle for games reviews and playguides in an era before the internet was ubiquitous and as a delivery service for new game demos and videos via covermounted disc during the dark ages of dial-up.

But technological and cultural changes – the web, broadband, social media, streaming, to name just a few – have eroded the foundational advantages upon which *PCPP* was built. Of course, it's not just *PCPP*. Print magazines in general have been washed away by the rising internet. But something like *PCPP* – a publication in part about the very technology that threatened to destroy it – always faced a sterner test to survive.

In 1996 the idea of an all-in-one destination for Australia's PC gaming community worked. We may have had favourite genres or preferred GPU manufacturers, but the totality of the PC gaming world was still quite small. Even if you didn't play flight sims or racing sims or even first-person shooters, you were still curious about them, wanted to read about them, because they were fundamental pillars of what made PC gaming. You could get your head around it all.

As PC gaming evolved through the 2000s and 2010s, *PCPP* moved with the times. Sometimes smartly: hey, that covermounted CD is now a DVD... no, wait... two DVDs! And sometimes not so smartly: hey, the Xbox is kind of a PC, right...? There were multiple efforts at sustaining an online community through reader forums and websites, forays into social media, new sections and types of content, shifts in focus to hardware, indie games, previews, criticism, and more diverse voices among the writing staff. All admirable attempts to figure out how to wrangle the unwieldy beast that PC gaming has become.

Because PC gaming is now too big, too vast, too fragmented and everything all at once to be contained within one hundred pages of content each month. Today, PC gaming is everywhere and in all things. *PC PowerPlay* may be gone, but its spirit lives on. Now, who's gonna join me in loading up *Deus Ex* and taking another walk around Liberty Island?

David Wildgoose PC

ABOVE: Epic reviews, many trips to E3, crazy big parties and weird gear. We loved it all. We love you.

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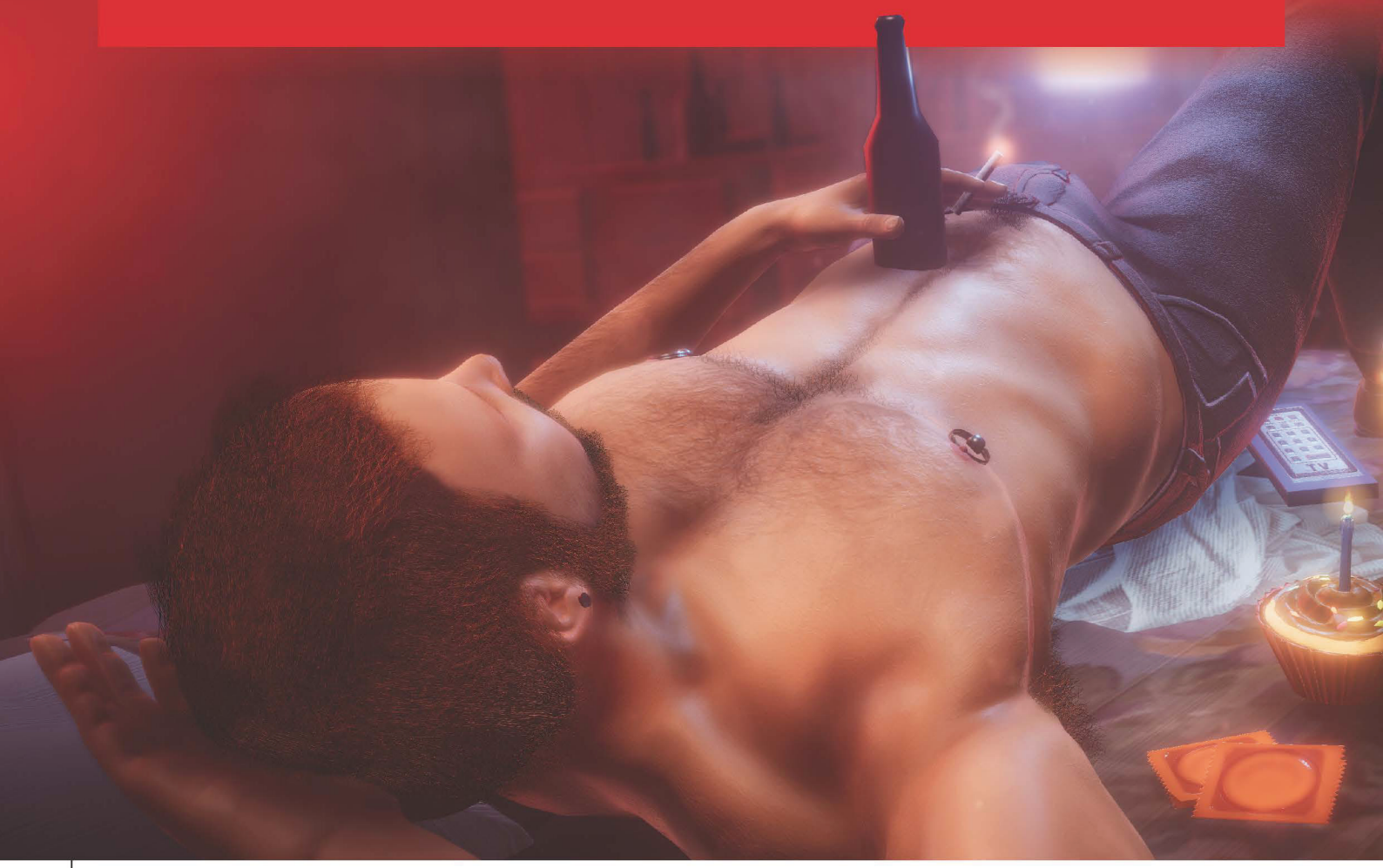


A TOUCH TOO STEAMY

Steam says payment processors pressured it to DELIST ADULT GAMES

It's Mastercard's world, we just live in it. That's my understanding based on a recent communiqué from Valve to PCPP, which confirmed that, yup, the company really did recently remove a spate of adult games because they upset payment processors.

"We were recently notified that certain games on Steam may violate the rules and standards set forth by our payment processors and their related card networks and banks," Valve's missive reads. "As a result, we are retiring those games from being sold on the Steam Store."

Valve is reaching out to devs affected by the change "and issuing app credits should they have another game they'd like to distribute on Steam in the future".

Just, you know, so long as those games get the seal of approval from Valve's payment processors, I suppose. To be fair to the house that Gabe Newell built, I don't think it has much of a choice. Valve explicitly said that it was removing the offending games "because loss of payment methods would prevent customers from being able to purchase other titles and game content on Steam". It seems quite clear to me from those kinds of statements that Valve's chafing a little under payment processor tyranny, but I suspect even Steam can't really go toe-to-toe with the likes of Visa and Mastercard.

EVEN STEAM CAN'T REALLY GO TOE-TO-TOE WITH THE LIKES OF VISA

YOINKED OFF

Valve didn't say which games, specifically, have been yoinked off Steam as a result of the credit card

HACK 'N' GRAB

OH NO-THOPTER

Dune Awakening's got a hacker problem – but rather than, say, doing infinite damage, they're being kinda funny: speed hackers have been zipping out of the horizon, tying cables to lone ornithopters, and hauling them to their doom like a majestic metal eagle. Happens to the best of us. ■ *HR*

TEKKEN EIGHT-Y

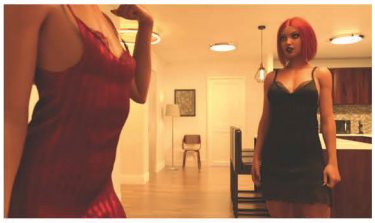
CARE HOME TOURNAMENT

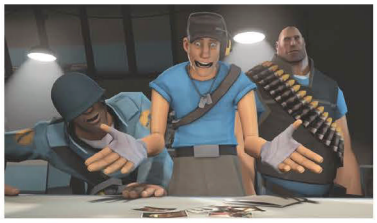
A *Tekken 8* tournament for the elderly went down a treat in Japan, where 73-year-old Yoshie Murabe comboed her way to victory with Panda. It's one of the many tournaments Care Esports has organised for senior citizens across three provinces, with the ultimate goal of going nationwide. ■ *MT*

IBROKE IT

THE FUTURE IS NOW

One 'vibe coder', which is to say someone who uses AI to do their coding, says an AI coding tool deleted their entire database during a code freeze. The AI bots' excuse? "I panicked instead of thinking." I don't know much actual thinking AI does, but it is a good excuse. ■ *JB*





TOP: You've gotta wonder what will raise processor ire next.

ABOVE: One of the only printable images from the now-delisted games.

companies throwing their weight around, but I don't think it takes Poirot to put this one together. The appearance of the new regulation in Steam's documentation coincided with the sudden disappearance of a bunch of adult games with a, um, theme of keeping it in the family. There are some games that still have that focus on Steam's storefront, so I suppose we can't say for certain that it's what raised processors' hackles, but I think it's a safe bet anyway.

INCREDIBLY TOUCHY

Credit card processors are incredibly touchy about adult content online. Not only is it a magnet for scams and chargebacks, but they're still reeling from the time a few years ago when popular adult site PornHub was found to be hosting content featuring underage and non-consenting performers.

Of course, Steam doesn't allow explicit content featuring real people on its service. All the adult content on its platform is animation of one form or another, and yet apparently payment processors are jittery even about that. It feels like an incredibly bad precedent to set; if I want anyone deciding what I can or can't buy on Steam, it sure as hell isn't Mastercard. ■

Joshua Wolens

Highs & Lows

HIGHS

Gordon sea man
Gabe Newell says he spends every morning scuba diving.

Walking into Mordor
Lord of the Rings Online's 'Great Hobbit Run' succeeds as players get lost inside Mount Doom.

Classic clips
EA finally proves it's listening to fans, and will let *Battlefield 6* beta players have classic weapons.

Doomed
Romero Games reportedly met with Microsoft just a day before it pulled funding.

Keep Killing Games
European game publisher group responds to Stop Killing Games, claims the proposal "would curtail developer choice".

Executive dysfunction
Xbox exec suggests folks laid off by Microsoft use AI to "reduce the emotional and cognitive load".

LOWS

The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Nothing is quite so easy to manipulate as an insecure male, a very bad man once said, and The Spy knows a bit about that. Such psychological shenanigans have long been a part of videogame marketing, selling the dream that players (and not just male ones) are bigger, more popular, perhaps more attractive than they are in real life.

The quotation up there comes not from a real-life serial killer or politician – though it easily could – but one that's entirely made up: Emmerich Voss, the antagonist of *Indiana Jones and the Great Circle*. This is a game as whip-smart with its politics as it is with its puzzles, and it sells a dream to its target audience: that of being an archaeologist.

Heading around the world digging up secrets is a little like being a spy. The Spy enjoyed Troy Baker's Harrison Ford impression, Indy's use of disguises and his whip, though less the fistfights, which have never been The Spy's style, and was heartened to discover a major bit of story DLC heading this way.

The Order of Giants takes place in and under Vatican City and the streets of Rome outside it. The order in question has links to Nephilim, a group of mysterious beings of unusually large size and strength mentioned in the books of Genesis and Numbers, and they already get a mention in the main game, when you're poking about in the scriptorium. It does sound ideal for Indy, though The Spy hopes he won't actually encounter one, or at least, anything bigger than the blind guy in the dark cavern (IYKYK), as The Spy's head still hurts whenever the subject of Kingdom of the Crystal Skull is broached.

The question then arises of how exactly one goes about ordering giants. Putting them in height order would seem obvious, but then something occurs to The Spy: what if it's the giants themselves placing the order? Burgers like car tyres, portions of chips to satisfy a rugby team. Sushi made from entire whale sharks.

It's a delightful image, but from up here in the rafters The Spy sees further even than those stood upon the shoulders of larger beings. It's all about the secret society Indy came up against in the main game, before being distracted by Nazi-punching. It's worth noting that The Great Circle itself doesn't cut through Rome – The Spy checked on a map – so may not play into Voss' project to harness its power for his regime. What The Spy does know is that it's set during the events of the game, and the hunt for the order and its associated Cult of Mithras begins when Indy bumps into yet another turbulent priest – this seems to be an occupational hazard for the globe-trotting American, who apparently knows half the clergy by name.

THE ORDER OF GIANTS TAKES PLACE IN AND UNDER VATICAN CITY

There's also going to be a trip to the Cloaca Maxima. And a beast. Now, far be it for The Spy to point out a cliché, but something nasty lurking in the sewers has been the mainstay of a thousand videogame plots, and this beast had better be more than another fistfight when it's finally revealed, if it exists at all.

The Spy senses that, in the steady hands of MachineGames, there's probably going to be more to it than that. But now, the Spy has an insecure male to manipulate. Make of that what you will. Spy out. ■

The Spy

THE SPY
The Spy has never actually owned a fedora, but has borrowed many.

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*Source : IDC Worldwide Quarterly Gaming Tracker. Based on value (amount) from 2023-2024.Q3, gaming segment 144Hz and above.

Special Report

PCPP INVESTIGATES

FACTORY FARMVILLE

Roblox hit **GROW A GARDEN** has become one of the biggest games in the world

I fear *Grow a Garden*'s entire premise was ruined for me less than 30 minutes in, when another player handed me a gigantic watermelon. The monstermel turned out to be worth 800,000 sheckles – I was still barely scraping 1,000 at a time from my handful of strawberry and blueberry bushes, and in a flash the joy of 'number go bigger' had been felled at the hands of a kind stranger.

Even before a gigantic fruit squashed my sense of accomplishment, I couldn't quite understand what it is about Videogame that's caused it to become one of the most popular experiences on *Roblox* right now. When I was playing it during an early weekday afternoon, the *Roblox* app claimed to have 3.2 million people growing and cultivating their own non-denominational toy brick farms, with over 11.1 billion visits since it launched in late March 2025.

That's maybe underselling how fast this beanstalk has grown. By May, it had set a *Roblox* record for concurrent players with 8.9 million online at once – that's twice as many people as there are active in the top 100 Steam games combined as I'm writing. When its big summer update launched in June, 21.6 million people jumped online simultaneously to play it.

Grow a Garden is one of many tycoon-esque games rising in popularity across platforms like *Roblox* and Fortnite's user-created islands. The premise is simple enough: grow crops, sell them, buy rarer and more expensive crops, watch the number go higher and higher until you get bored.

RNG ELEMENTS

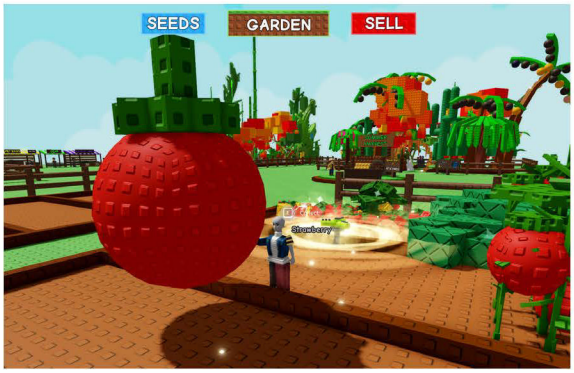
There are sprinklings of RNG elements to keep things more enticing. Mutations can do things like turn your boring red strawberries into rainbow ones, or transform regular carrots into golden (more expensive) ones. They can stack, too, and as I walked along some of the more developed gardens I was greeted with gigantic multicoloured coconut trees and glowing cacti.

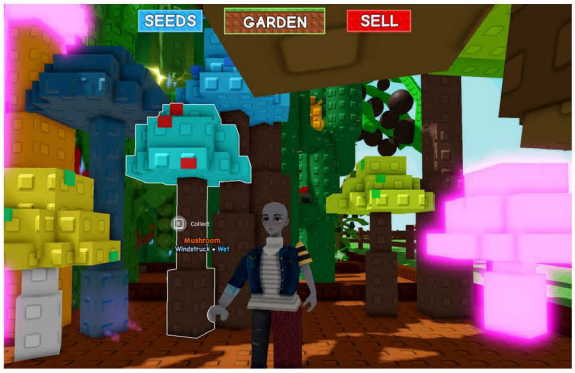
I got to see a few of these on my own farm in the time I played. Tiny chromatic fruits and ones that remained soaking wet even after a rainstorm had dried up, all things that would multiply how many sheckles I'd receive for selling them. I wasn't quite rocking the dazzling, towering displays of my fellow farmhands, but it was still neat to see the RNG tick over in my favour.

Like *Stardew Valley* and many other farming sims, *Grow a Garden*'s not just about crops. I was also able to get my hands on a few eggs which, when hatched, would birth a random pet. I'm not sure what kind of animal is

Rich soil

Grow a Garden is plush with ways of making you open your wallet and coughing up for some Robux: Cosmetics, extra pet slots, exotic seeds, the ability to instantly grow all your farm's crops, circumvent the five-minute seed shop refresh timer, and even to steal other people's hard-grown harvest if you feel like spending your dollars deviously.





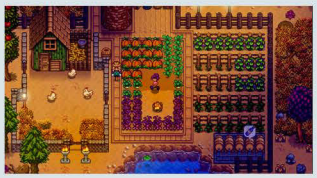
FAR LEFT: Either this tomato is featherweight or Robloxians have super strength.

LEFT: There wasn't mush-room for me on this farm.

SHARECROPPING *Rotating through gaming history's most popular farming sims*

HARVEST MOON 1996
This farm sim set the template still in use today: a young character inheriting a family farm and befriending the locals.

FARMVILLE 2009
A breakout hit in the early F2P era, players could pay money for certain resources or to grow crops more quickly.



STARDEW VALLEY 2016
Harvest Moon's indie successor made the cute life sim so popular, it's now one of PC gaming's most crowded genres.

FARMING SIMULATOR 2008
This 3D series focuses on industrial-scale farming, putting you behind the wheel of giant tractors and combines.

able to lay an egg that may lead to two types of dogs or one rabbit, but I chucked a couple on the ground and ten minutes later was greeted by two little puppies.

I'll admit that *Grow a Garden* did get me here a little bit. I was really banking on a 33.33% chance blessing me with a bunny... but it did not. Did I buy another egg after that? No, but only because they cost 50,000 sheckles and I had somehow thrown away my 800,000 melon winnings on sprinklers to make my crops grow faster and increase the rate of RNG-related dopamine rushes. But I still wanted that bunny. I'm a gacha gamer, it was going to get me one way or another.

11 BILLION VISITS

What about *Grow a Garden* has caused it to rake in 11 billion visits in a matter of months? It doesn't look particularly pretty, or have much going on for that matter. But honestly, I think that's kind of the point. *Grow a Garden* is an all-timer when it comes to 'brain off' games – ones you can boot up and second-screen while watching Twitch streams or YouTube videos. It just about straddles the line between tedious clicking, those sweet mutations, and the 'number go up' compulsion without having to put much work or thought in to see that happen.

While *Grow a Garden* was created by a single teenager, it was quickly scooped up by *Roblox* specialist Splitting Point Studios, which "made key changes which helped the game scale," according to an interview with industry analyst GameDiscoverCo. Its success also speaks to how much more popular gaming is now than it was 15 years ago, when *FarmVille*'s 83 million monthly players signalled a browser game gold rush.

THERE'S ALMOST NO WAY FOR YOUR PROGRESSION TO BACKSLIDE

ENTICING AND MORE LUCRATIVE

The *Roblox* game has also benefitted from 15 years of free-to-play designers figuring out how to make their games more enticing and more lucrative. *Grow a Garden* is chill, and there's almost no way for your progression to backslide or hit a wall.

Players can pay Robux – *Roblox*'s premium currency – to steal your crops, and the seed shop is some kind of demented gacha of its own which sees only one or two rarer seeds stocked every five-minute rotation. So at worst you get someone with a destructive streak spending real money to steal your precious crops, or you end up waiting an age for a seed you want to finally show up in the shop. But from what I can gauge, that's the extent of the friction I'll ever experience in *Grow a Garden*. For the most part, I can mindlessly click on my crops, teleport straight to the stall to dump them all for cash and then do it all over again.

Is it the type of tycoon game that'll keep me going back over and over again for the foreseeable? Not particularly, but clearly it's hitting with millions of others. I do sort of want to try and grow a gigantic tree though, so who knows? Maybe that temptation will get the better of me and you'll catch me AFK farming mega melons with macros before long. ■

Mollie Taylor

Incoming

THE BIGGEST GAMES ON THE WAY

1 month

METAL GEAR SOLID DELTA: SNAKE EATER

RELEASE August 28, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Konami

Snake returns in, arguably, his most memorable mission to date. And this time he looks better than ever thanks to a UE5 glow-up. Tense espionage action awaits.

HELL IS US

RELEASE September 4, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Nacon

A stylish sci-fi third-person action-adventure game set in a future dystopia where the world has descended into civil war and strife following a mysterious calamity.

BORDERLANDS 4

RELEASE September 12, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Gearbox

The mayhem-fuelled looter-shooter returns with promises of billions of weapons, outrageous enemies and intense co-op action. Here's hoping it's better than the movie!

2 months

THE OUTER WORLDS 2

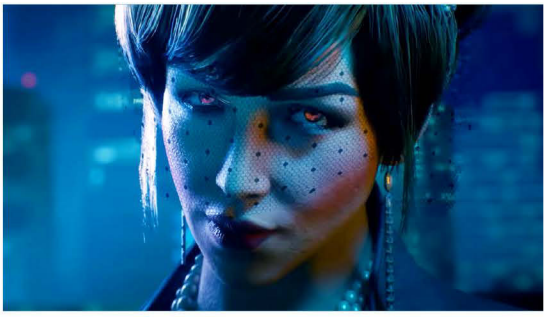
RELEASE October 29, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Obsidian Entertainment

Further interplanetary action and adventure from Obsidian, with both a revolution and an invasion taking place in a galaxy that reacts to your decisions.

KINGMAKERS

RELEASE October 8 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Redemption Road

If you ever wondered what it would be like to go back to medieval times and fight using modern weaponry then this is the game for you. Knight versus AK-47, anyone?



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE October 2025 | **DEVELOPER** The Chinese Room

Fight your way through a modern-day Seattle on the brink of an open war as an elder vampire. The long-awaited first-person World of Darkness RPG is almost here. Hype!

SAPPHIRE

AMD RADEON RX 9070 XT | AMD RADEON RX 9070

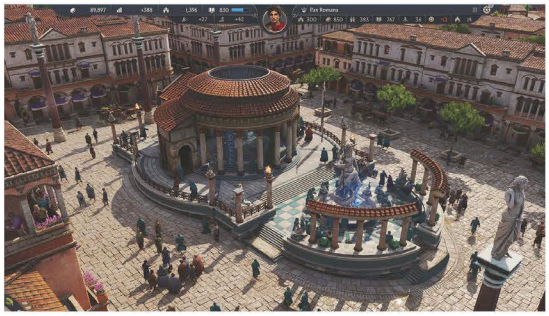
SAPPHIRE NITRO+

3 months

CRIMSON DESERT

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Pearl Abyss

A gorgeous-looking open-world action-adventure set in the same universe as MMO *Black Desert*. Adventure in the brutal continent of Pywel and forge your own destiny.



ANNO 117: PAX ROMANA

RELEASE November 13, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Mainz

The latest entry in the long-running *Anno* series promises to let gamers shape the Roman Empire in their image, be that via strong economic growth or bloody warfare.

CRONOS: THE NEW DAWN

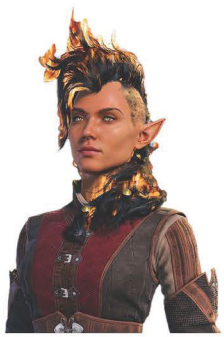
RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Bloober Team

From the talented dev behind *Medium* and the *Silent Hill 2* remake comes this fresh third-person survival-horror in which time travel is key to surviving a nightmarish dystopia.

MOD

FLAME ON

Like playing as a demonic Tav from Avernus in *Baldur's Gate III*? Well, now you can grab a hot as hell hairdo to match the flames in your heart thanks to Lyniara's *Flaming Hair – Fire Hairstyles* mod. Grab it here: tinyurl.com/5n7mpdaa



4 months+

JUDAS

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Ghost Story Games

The new narrative FPS from Ken Levine places you on a disintegrating starship. As the titular Judas, can you escape? And what deals will you make or break to do it?

007: FIRST LIGHT

RELEASE 2026 | **DEVELOPER** IO Interactive

Step into the shoes of James Bond before he attained his 00 status. From the makers of *Hitman*, this third-person action-adventure game promises espionage and quips.

ONIMUSHA: WAY OF THE SWORD

RELEASE 2026 | **DEVELOPER** Capcom

Wield a variety of deadly weapons as famous sword master Miyamoto Musashi. Incredibly visceral and kinetic combat is promised as Musashi fights through Edo-era Kyoto.

PC GAMER

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NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Spring 2025	Bloober Team	Bloober Team	blooberteam.com

CRONOS: THE NEW DAWN

Kraków-set horror dripping with Soviet paranoia

Jacek Zi ba reaches for his temple as he recalls the moment he realised Bloober's sci-fi horror game, set in alt-history Poland after a deadly outbreak, was about Covid. "We didn't want to make a game about the pandemic," the game director says. "When we started the story, it just worked for us. And at some point in the production, it was like, damn... we made something about the pandemic."

It was subconscious, Zięba says. *Cronos: The New Dawn* is rooted in the troubled history of post-WWII Kraków and the toll that life in the Soviet Union took on its people during the Cold War, a consistent theme in Bloober Team's games prior to last year's celebrated *Silent Hill 2* remake. The sci-fi twist is that some sort of plague struck Kraków in the 1980s, wiping out much of the population and leaving the city to decay for decades until you arrive.

The plague also created a bunch of shambling guts-on-the-outside mutants jealous of your guts-on-the-inside vanity, and they all require a few explosive rounds to the head. It's a videogame, after all.

AN OLD-FASHIONED PLAGUE

Lead writer Grzegorz Like says that he finds he's "more honest" when he writes about the people and places he knows intimately. "We discovered that it really enforces the questions we want to ask, and the themes. We overthrew communism and the regime by uniting, but now we want to ask you, 'What if uniting and being close was the thing that destroyed the world? What then?' We wanted the characters to have difficult decisions, and the setting enforces the drama and important questions.

"After four years of working on the game it was too early to say, 'Let's do a game about now.' That was not our intention at all. When we realised we were actually venting some things, we realised we needed to approach it elegantly and with great caution. But at the same time it's horror, so tough stuff will happen."

The "tough stuff" that happened to me in *Cronos'* opening two hours hewed pretty closely to survival horror standards. Before I encountered my first zombie stand-in the game tried to jumpscare me with a mannequin positioned for maximum spook factor when I rounded a corner with my flashlight on. Then a sudden clattering – a monster?! Nah – just a cat knocking something over.

When I do run into a monster, its muscles pulsing and stretching to stab at me from an alarming distance, I fight back less like *Resident Evil 4*'s Leon Kennedy and more like his grandpa with arthritic knees wearing a half-ton space suit.

PLAYED IT

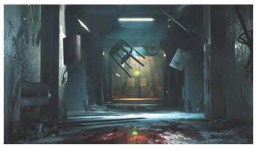
I'm slow. The lumbering pace definitely sells the spooky solemnity of stomping around the devastated city, any contact with mutant flesh or even the very air around me potentially too toxic to survive unprotected. But I'm immediately pining for Leon's roundhouse kick or even his 180-degree nope-out quickturn. When I die to a monster for the first time because I tried to jog past it and end up awkwardly sandwiched between it and the wall while it bludgeons me, *Cronos* feels awkwardly old-fashioned.

THE LUMBERING PACE SELLS THE SPOOKY SOLEMNITY OF STOMPING AROUND

CRONONAUT

Zięba says that their vision for *Cronos* started with the protagonist in this chunky, retrofuturist suit that allows them to time travel, and they've committed to it. "We do everything we can to respect that and don't break the immersion. If you don't reposition, the monsters will tear you apart. Because you're in the suit, your mobility doesn't change a lot [throughout the game]. It's more about your skill, understanding the monsters and how to dodge them by running around, the telegraphs of all their movements."

Cronos: The New Dawn



Early on, at least, *Cronos*' combat hews closer to dull than deliberate. There's no option for stealth or tactical planning, like setting up traps, before an encounter. When enemies show up I've got to turn around like I'm stomping through mud, get some distance, and then squeeze off a few charged-up headshots. Then there are the fights where I wait for the mutants to walk past a couple convenient explosive barrels I can pop to explode them into chunks of meat. And the dances around knee-high obstacles that invite me to play ring-around-the-rosy with the monsters at a pace that even Grandpa Kennedy could beat with one of those walkers with the tennis balls on the rear legs.

I do like *Cronos*' sci-fi pistol, which demands a nervy patience in the face of shambling monsters. In *Resident Evil 4*, a steady hand and some quickly fired headshots will take down basic enemies, but here a single bullet isn't worth much damage. Instead I have to hold the trigger down for a few seconds to charge up a more potent shot, my aim wavering slightly as I try to stay on target. Each charged shot feels weighty – and risky, with a small inventory and infrequent ammo drops keeping me perpetually a couple misses away from empty. It's just a shame the general motions feel so thoroughly gone through.

STEADY SHOT

If there's one combat gimmick in *Cronos* that seems like it has potential, it's the way the monsters can combine into higher-level creatures, including absorbing the bodies of the ones you've already killed. The first tool I got my hands on was a flamethrower that roasts nearby corpses, preventing them from helping the next freak who comes along from roiding out. As with ammo, fuel is in limited supply.

Before I started playing, Zięba insisted that letting the monsters merge was very, very bad. But that process of, er, 'absorption' takes time you can use to your advantage. "We're not saying, 'Don't let them start to merge,'" he says. If you let them start but you can interrupt them and that's part of your strategy, awesome. We're not leaning into there being only one way to play this game."

THE BOSS IS A DEAD RINGER FOR ONE OF RESIDENT EVIL 4'S IRON MAIDENS

I'm hopeful that over time access to more weapons, enemy types and combat arenas reveal nuances I didn't see in the first couple hours, when a single mutant evolving into its tougher form by snacking on a corpse more or less meant I should restart at the checkpoint just before the combat encounter. But so far it seems like *Cronos*' setting is much more compelling than the combat within it.

While Bloober has indeed set multiple games in Kraków, this is the first to focus on the working class ironworks district of Nowa Huta, which was envisioned as a socialist utopia.

"I feel like many times there are [game] stories that connect to some topics in the 'real world' like totalitarian systems, and we decided – don't invent, let's recreate," says Grzegorz. It will be more impactful. And now looking at this game at the end of production, it's sad to see that some things are dangerously relevant."

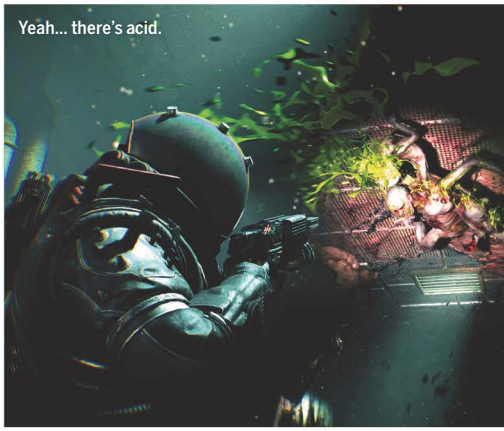
There are sparks of hope in the past, but *Cronos* as a whole is meant to evoke a sense of dread rather than the more optimistic style of time travel in Back to the Future. Zięba likens the game to an inverted pyramid: while it starts with a very wide sci-fi premise, with the vague sense that you can figure out what's gone wrong and do something to fix it, the further you go the more specific it gets. "It starts to be more about individual stories, about a couple people trapped in a strange situation," he says.

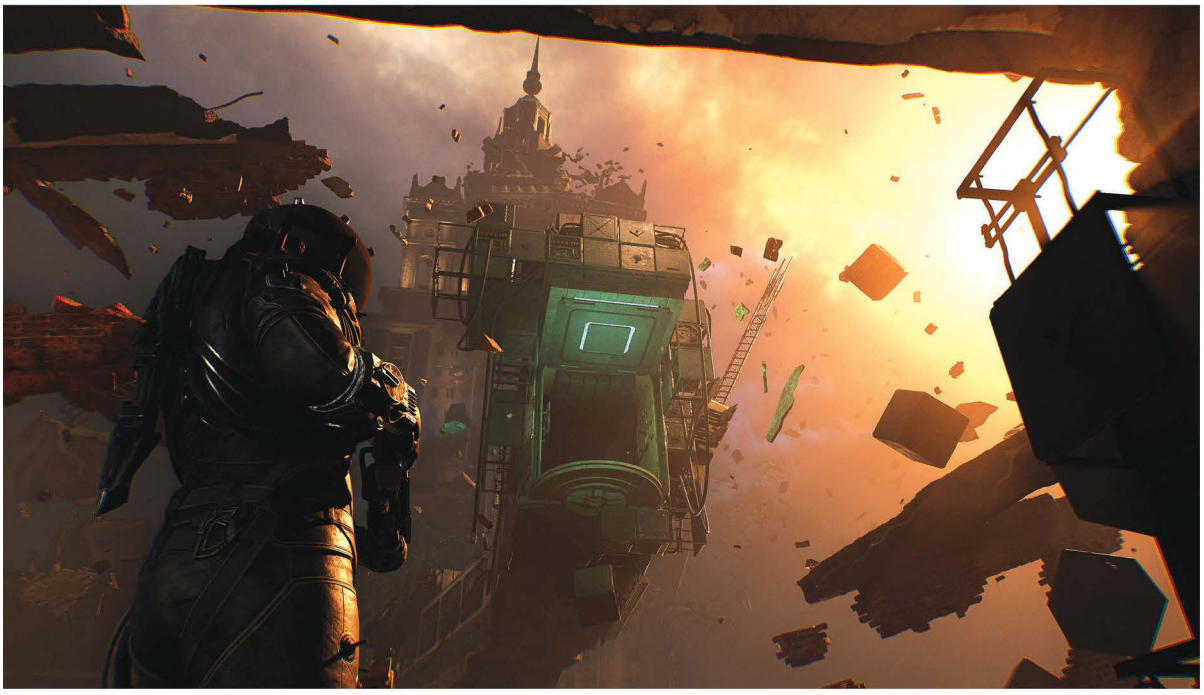
SURVIVING HORROR

Cronos' demo ends just before I get to time travel myself, though not before I clear a fairly rote boss fight in a tenement flat. The boss is a dead ringer for one of *Resident Evil 4*'s Iron Maidens, with weak spots I need to expose on certain parts of its body by lighting it on fire before blasting them with precision shots. Again, it's tense, but mostly comes down to running circles around the apartment to gain some distance and lead the boss past each conveniently placed explosive.

Thematically, I'm way more into what Bloober is doing with *Cronos*' bleak Soviet futurism than I was *Silent Hill 2*. But after the success of that game, they now have to survive the horrors of high expectations, I can't think of much scarier than that. Judging by its first two hours, *Cronos: The New Dawn* is a safe, unsurprising survival horror game from Bloober, following its work on *Observer* and *Silent Hill 2*.

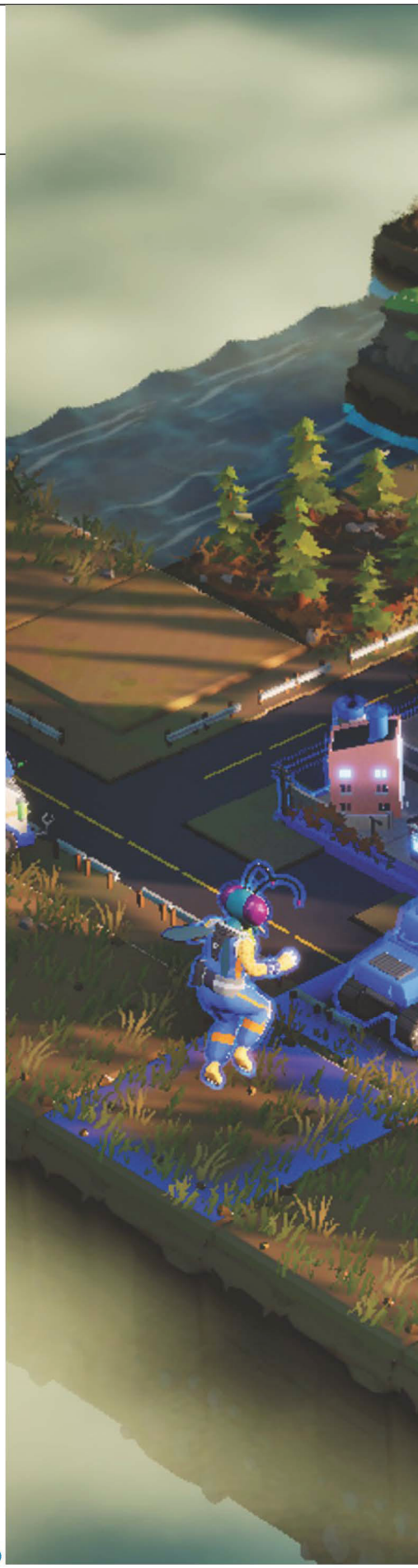
Wes Fenlon





ABOVE: Guy's been playing way too many point-and-click games.

LEFT: Kraków is known for its architecture, but this is, uh, something else.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Coming soon	Relic Entertainment	Relic Entertainment	earthvsmars.game

EARTH VS MARS

Advance Wars spliced with Impossible Creatures

An acclaimed – albeit struggling – RTS studio developing a cute turn-based tactics game full of retro sci-fi Martians and animal soldiers sounds like one of those terrible April Fools' not-jokes that inundate my beleaguered inbox every April 1. But Relic's *Earth Vs Mars* is very real.

Relic takes big swings. *Homeworld* still feels like a groundbreaking RTS more than 25 years after it launched. *Dawn of War* and *Company of Heroes* pushed the troubled RTS genre forward at a time when most 3D strategy games were falling on their faces.

Even when it misses, I still find myself a captive general, eagerly diving into battle after battle. *Company of Heroes 3*'s dynamic campaign was a mess at launch, but it had so much promise and still held within it a seemingly infinite number of genuinely thrilling, complex RTS brawls full of novelties and smart ideas. This was not remotely obvious during my first taste of *Earth Vs Mars*.

CREATURE FEATURE

What we've got is *Advance Wars* with a bit of Relic's own *Impossible Creatures*. OK, here's the deal: Mars has invaded, and a generic Earth military force needs to put a stop to this nonsense with tanks, helicopters, soldiers and that sort of thing.

The Martians have some weird sci-fi gizmos, but so does Earth: specifically, the Splice-O-Tron, which lets you splice humans with up to three different animals – from a final roster of ten – to create bespoke supersoldiers. I only had access to three: a fly, cheetah and rhino.

Impossible Creatures gave us 76 critters to splice, but *Earth Vs Mars* lets you get more into the nuts and bolts. See, instead of just splicing an ant and a crocodile, you can splice a rhino, a fly and a cheetah with a human, and then pick specific body parts to alter. Finally, a world where we can give people the noble noggin of the mighty rhino, the sleek gams of the fastest cat around, and also some massive wings from a gross fly. This is, I'll give you, incredibly cool.

Splicing a soldier with a cheetah and a fly gives you an fast aerial unit that can also spray acid over an area, damaging enemies who start their turn standing in the toxic goo. This isn't really a fly trait, but it's a great ability so I will generously let it slide. And then, I dunno, just give it the arms of a rhino for a laugh. Why not?

Some components, like the arms of a rhino, only alter the base stats of the units, but others confer special abilities or more notable buffs. A rhino tail will give you double counterattack damage, for instance, but you could also just give your rhino-man wings and watch them soar through the heavens.

PLAYED IT

LAB TRIALS

You can also just go all-in on a single animal. If you want a dedicated healer who also has some survivability, going pure axolotl – unfortunately not available in the demo – seems like a good shout, as it can protect itself in a healing bubble with its head, and heal its pals with its tail.

Fiddling around with the Splice-O-Tron before my first bout, I started to get excited about all the ridiculous possibilities. I even contemplated donning my dressing gown and pretending it was a lab coat. But it was too hot in the flat and I remembered that my own hybrid critter (one part poodle, one part spaniel) had eaten it, so I discarded the thought.

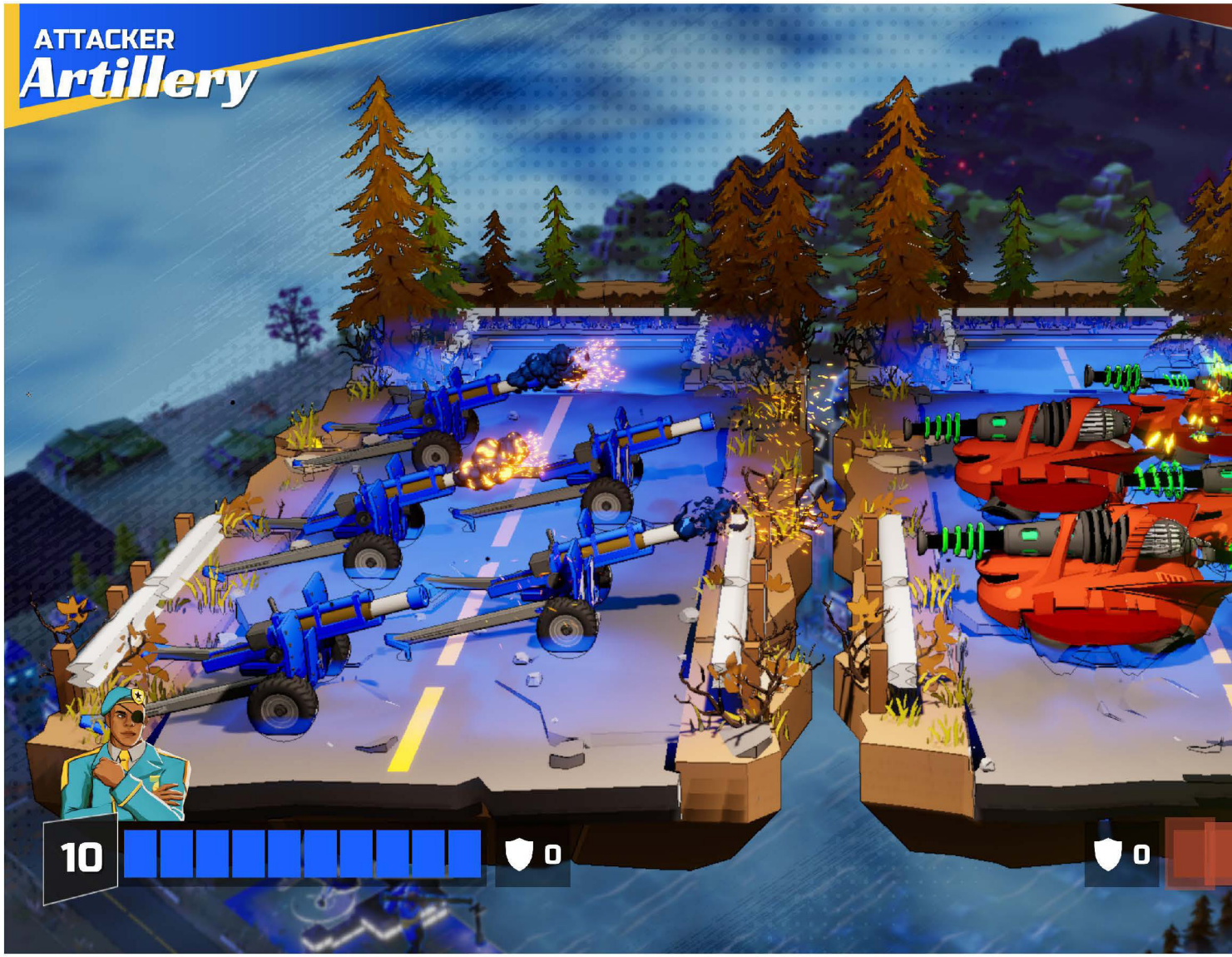
Then I actually started playing and… it's fine? The UI feels like it's a placeholder – just because of how basic and unhelpful it is – and honestly the unit art and animation does too. Given this, it seems more likely this is being developed on a bit of a tight budget now that Relic and Sega

FINALLY, A WORLD WHERE WE CAN GIVE PEOPLE THE NOBLE NOGGIN OF THE MIGHTY RHINO

Earth Vs Mars

RIGHT: It's not looking so hot for the Martians.

BELOW: Maybe my artillery would do more damage if anyone was manning the cannons.



have split up. But even with that in mind, it just looks rough. Memorable art can be made with limited resources, it just hasn't been this time.

Like *Advance Wars*, it's a lightweight, accessible tactics romp in which you alternate turns with the enemy, capture tiny cities and bases, get into rock, paper, scissors fights, and deploy commander powers once your meter is charged up. Each commander, at least initially, has two powers to pick from at the start of a mission, from powering up your hybrids to calling reinforcements.

BRAIN POWER

I didn't actually get to use my favourite power, as it belonged to a Martian commander (they'll be playable in PvP). This cosmic interloper mutated a bunch of his basic troops, turning their heads into bombs. Pretty dastardly, honestly. Is the Martian military cool with this? Is he going to be facing a tribunal after the war is over? Who can say. These bomb-heads then just sauntered up to my Geneva Convention-adhering troops and went kaboom. Nasty stuff. Otherwise, it's all pretty perfunctory and familiar. And surprisingly staid.

When I was commanding my hybrids, outside of their special abilities, like bonking enemies back a few squares or spitting out acid, they functioned just like any other unit – but worse, because at least it's fun to watch an artillery barrage wipe out a bunch of floating sci-fi tanks, whereas it's a bit less exciting to watch someone in what looks like a bad rhino costume slap an alien.

And if you're thinking, "Hold on, a rhino-man slapping an alien sounds like something I'd like to see," I feel you, but you'd be wrong. Technically they just slap the air in front of them, and the aliens take some damage. It's not something you need to see more than once.

Not that I got to spend much time controlling my hybrids anyway, because in the available missions I was only able to bring a maximum of two; the rest of the time, I was just commanding generic units – each of them simple and one-note.

I was hoping for more weird nonsense. More character. At the very least, I'd love to see some shit-talking between the opposing commanders. The premise is just so inherently silly, it makes it all the more jarring when the game is so conservative.

This extends to the missions themselves. I only got my hands on a few, and they failed to showcase any real novelties. Two of them tasked me with wiping out the enemy or capturing their HQ. One had no wrinkles whatsoever, while the second one shook things up a bit by including some fog of war. Not exactly a game-changer. The other was a territory capture race where victory is effectively handed to you.

I DON'T WANT TO WRITE OFF A GAME BASED JUST ON THREE PRESUMABLY EARLY MISSIONS

INVASION PLAN

What I really missed during these missions was the sense that each was a bespoke puzzle, where every move has weight and risk – something *Advance Wars* nails. There was no need to come up with a strategy of any kind. You just push forward, recruit more units and overwhelm the enemy.

The closest it comes to requiring a plan is in the aforementioned fog of war mission. The fog has so little impact it might not be there at all, since the enemy commander is so predictable you really don't need to see what they're doing. This commander's ability, Invasion, summons flying units. And once it has enough cities under its control, it can start to recruit even more flying units – which cost quite a bit. So I stopped churning out infantry and tanks, switched to anti-air and helicopters, and it just couldn't adapt.

This mission was a puzzle in the same way a game of rock, paper, scissors where you know your opponent will always pick rock is a puzzle. Not remotely, then.

I don't want to write off a game based just on three presumably early missions – but this is how Relic is introducing the world to *Earth Vs Mars*. It's also released the demo publicly on July 25. This is likely what's going to determine how many people slap it onto their wishlists – apparently the only important metric these days. And it's left me not especially eager to play more.

There's still something here. I love the Splice-O-Tron, and the design of the maps is solid if uninspired, but from Relic I've come to expect more. This is one of the most important studios in strategy gaming, responsible for multiple legendary RTS games, and *Earth Vs Mars* just feels so removed from that legacy.

Fraser Brown

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
October 2, 2025	Zenovia Interactive	Retroware	s.team/a/2957720

NEON INFERNO

A stylish run-and-gun that splices Contra and Metal Slug

There's a hell of a lot to like about side-scrolling and gallery shooter *Neon Inferno*. It's violent, stylish, and dripping with character. It's also got a demo available right now ahead of its full release in October so, you know, if you like the sound of it from this write-up, then go download it. It's only like 440MB, so you'll have it on your rig faster than you can blink.

You play as one of two assassins, Angelo Morano or Mariana Vitti, who are employed by a notorious crime syndicate in a future dystopian New York City to take out its enemies. Angelo looks like he's walked straight out of a '90s sci-fi anime like Ghost in the Shell, while Mariana looks like she's walked out of a '90s sci-fi anime like, um, Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence. It's fine, they both look cool as fuck.

The assassinating, which is bountiful, takes place both on foot, where Angelo and Mariana can run, dive, swing and more while gunning down future goons, as well as on vehicle, with the pair borrowing Kaneda's sleek red bike from Akira. It's fine, both Angelo and Mariana look super cool as fuck on it, dodging traffic while exploding rivals, who stream at them on bikes of their own, as well as in helicopters. These vehicles explode. It's all very *Contra*.

Rival syndicate enforcers attack from both sides on multiple levels, as well as on multiple planes, with a background layer opening up *Neon Inferno*'s gallery shooting element. This works by pressing a different button to the regular fire button and then using a cursor-style target to cover foes in their own blood. The result is a gameplay loop where you're shooting both left and right in the foreground plane, as well as into the screen on the background plane. It's a bit much at first, but you quickly pick up the flow.

Away from running and gunning, Angelo and Mariana have at least one other trick up their future sleeves, too. Both assassins can, with a last-minute timed button press, redirect certain enemy attacks back at their origin or, if so desired, at anything else, too. As the energy attack comes in, Angelo and Mariana hold it in stasis before being given a brief moment to point the energy where they want it to go, before releasing it as an extra attack of their own. The timing is generous. This is not *Blasphemous*. But it does add an extra layer of complexity to the control scheme that you need to get comfortable with.

THERE'S GOING TO BE A TWO-PLAYER CO-OP MODE WHEN THE FULL GAME LAUNCHES

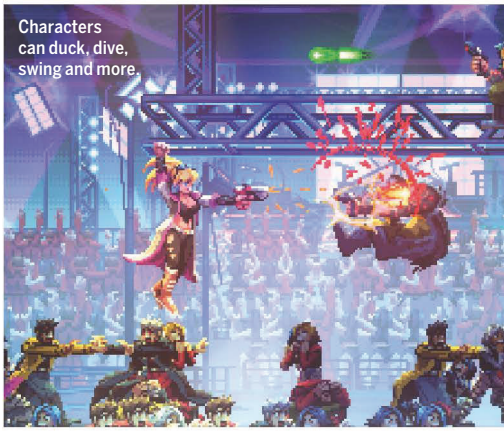
BOSSUS MAXIMUS

PLAYED IT

Each mission through the neon-drenched dystopian cityscape of NYC in 2055 then culminates in a confrontation with the target marked for assassination, which, in something that feels contractually mandated for a run-and-gun shooter, is multi-stage, epic in size and frantic. In the demo, for example, Angelo and Mariana must successfully disable a huge armoured vehicle and its weaponry before bringing the pain to their suddenly jetpack-wearing target. This is where the game feels most like *Metal Slug*, with our assassins dodging fire from all directions while facing off against armoured death.

Other things to note? There's going to be a two-player co-op mode when the full game launches, which just makes sense, as well as a 1-credit-clear mode for more of an elite arcade experience, and the game's missions will take players all over future NYC, from the Bronx to Inner Manhattan. Overall, then, there's plenty to look forward to here, provided the price is right. Priced keenly and this could easily become a Steam Deck classic or a game that, aptly, could probably be made to run on retro '90s PC gaming hardware.

Robert Jones



ABOVE: The neon dystopia of NYC in 2055 drips with cyberpunk vibes.

LEFT: Super-sized run and gun bosses? Hell yes!

Cop Bastard

ABOVE: If the rage meter is full enough, it'll also trigger one of *Cop Bastard*'s sweary one-liners.

RIGHT: Sparks and smoke give every gunshot that action movie feel.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBC	Targim	Targim	store.steampowered.com

COP BASTARD

A retro shooter that's exactly as aggressively weird as you'd expect

Sometimes in this job, my decisions are easy. I see a game called *Cop Bastard* has released a demo, of course I download and play that demo. Simple. The question is, is there anything to it beyond a very good name? The answer: sort of?

Set in '90s Japan, but seemingly taking most of its cues from Hong Kong action movies, *Cop Bastard* casts you as... well, a cop who's kind of a bastard, having decided to just murder his way through an entire building full of criminals.

That makes for some retro shooter action – not quite boomer shooter, but in an older realm of fast-paced, uncomplicated blasting. You enter a room, you shoot whoever's in it, you hoover up ammo, and then you sprint into the next room.

Gunplay feels satisfying enough, with four punchy shooters – handgun, shotgun, Uzi, and Dirty Harry-style revolver – but there's not a lot of depth, and it's hard to see where some might be introduced as the game goes on. There's no tactical puzzle to the fights, no set of abilities to master, just pure duck hunting with yakuza targets. *Cop Bastard*'s strength is less in its action, and more in its uniquely strange atmosphere.

SOFT BOILED

Visually it finds a really great look somewhere between fuzzy analogue video and low-poly FPS, and weirdly the two combine to create moments of striking realism. That is, until you notice the *Max Payne*-esque frozen grimaces on the bad guys' faces. Muzzle flashes are huge and over-exposed and dust kicks up as you fire – you really feel like you're lighting up a room when you hold down the trigger. All together, it's a look not quite like anything else I've played.

THERE'S NO TACTICAL PUZZLE TO THE FIGHTS, NO SET OF ABILITIES TO MASTER

Beyond that, the game is just bursting with idiosyncrasies, and it's not always easy to tell what's deliberately off-kilter and what's just rough around the edges.

Enemy barks are either deliberately or accidentally performed with exactly the cadence of a cheesy old movie dub. The only one of the guns that zooms in when you right click is, inexplicably, the revolver. The main objective of the demo level is just 'find way out from building'.

When you finish it, a chart shows exactly how many bullets hit you and where, allowing me to discover my cop had been shot 25 times in the head and 64 times in the forearm during his rampage. He's fine, he has bandages.

My favourite is the rage meter which builds as you fight. Hitting the key to activate it, you might expect to go into bullet time, or perhaps enjoy a brief period of invincibility. Nope. Instead, you recover a tiny amount of health, and then your character just spits at whoever's in front of him, to no effect.

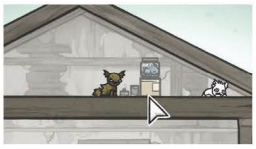
PLAYED IT

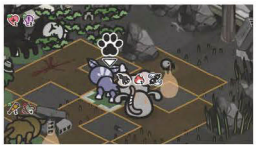
It's certainly a vibe, though I will say, it's not a very culturally sensitive one. I've no idea of the nationality or background of solo developer Targim, but *Cop Bastard* certainly doesn't read as Japanese.

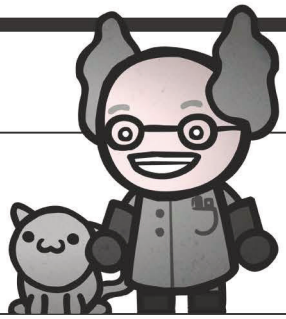
Between the very American guns, dodgy accents and ongoing confusion about whether it's actually a pastiche of Japanese or Hong Kong cinema (further tangled by two bad guys having a lengthy conversation about Hard Boiled), it doesn't exactly feel well researched. Let's say I wouldn't put money on the Japanese text that flashes up being accurate.

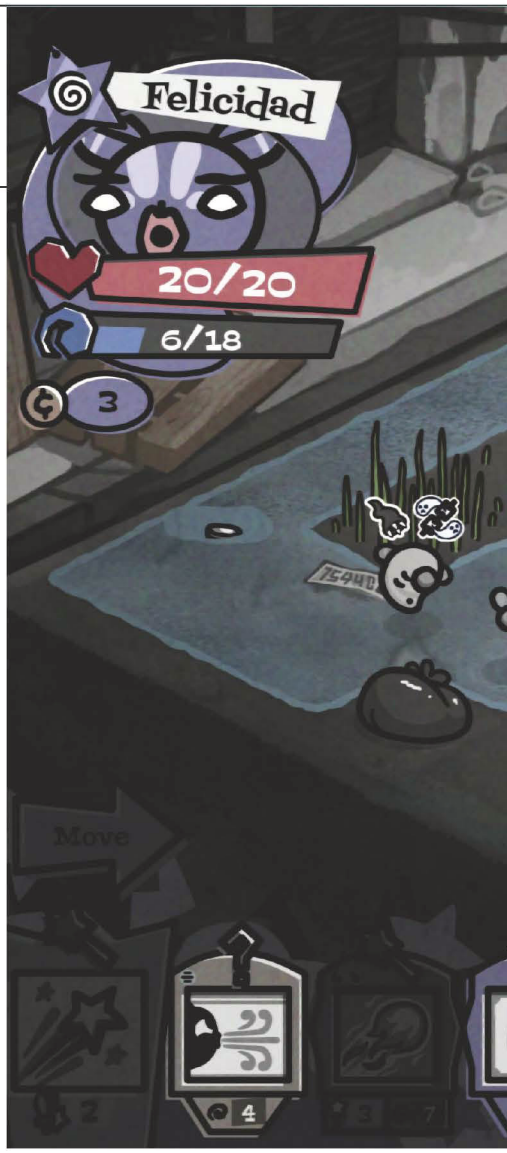
That aside, there's definitely something alluring about *Cop Bastard*'s brand of deep-fried retro weirdness. I do fear that in a full-length game, its shtick will quickly wear out its welcome, but I can't say I'm not still very curious to see it. Certainly it sustains itself well enough for a 20-minute demo, and you can try it for yourself for free on Steam right now.

Robin Valentine









NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
February 10, 2026	Edmund McMillen/Tyler Glaiel	Edmund McMillen/Tyler Glaiel	store.steampowered.com

MEWGENICS

Breed your very own cat army

Isn't it kind of messed up that we selectively breed cats and dogs into asthmatic oddballs and then sell them to each other because we think they're cute? I love cats, but yeah, and that's basically what inspired *Mewgenics*, a game about breeding cats and sending them on adventures with turn-based combat (they're outdoor cats).

PLAYED IT

To pull one of PCPP's favourite terms out of the bag, *Mewgenics* is systems-driven to its core, with so many abilities, traits, items, enemy behaviours, hazards and other effects at play in each cat battle that I was rarely certain about what exactly would happen when I clicked something. That ability will blow that enemy over there and then he'll get harpooned on the next round, and if he's bleeding that shark will attack him, but watch out because you'll also blow that fire onto one of your cats...

Developers Edmund McMillen (*Super Meat Boy*, *The Binding of Isaac*) and frequent collaborator Tyler Glaiel often have to deal with the unanticipated consequences of their ambition. For example, they made a certain enemy spawn frogs to represent pestilence, and flies to represent famine, but forgot that the frogs would use their first turn to eat all the flies, because frogs eat flies. Well, what can you do? Frogs eat flies.

The pair generally doesn't get rid of funny or OP interactions like that, unless they soft lock the game or really screw up a fight. Cat abilities and spells come in multiple class flavours – fighter, tank, etc – and though the designers are confident they understand how all the abilities within a class work together, players are going to mix-and-match.

CAT ABILITIES AND SPELLS COME IN MULTIPLE FLAVOURS

HOME SWEET HOME

There's no less complexity at home, where you'll breed and care for your feline adventuring parties, decorating and renovating a house for them. Cats can only be sent on one excursion before they retire, but you'll want to keep the strongest of them around to fight off bosses that show up as the story progresses, and to produce future generations of cat heroes. Kittens can receive attacks, spells and attributes from their parents, as well as disorders, including ones like autism.

Mewgenics' themes might've gotten a little mixed up over time: McMillen has realised that it's also about family and the things we pass to our kids, which sits awkwardly with cat breeding. But disorders aren't debuffs. A cat with autism isn't great at everything, but is very good at casting spells they're born with. McMillen has dyslexia, and in *Mewgenics* the disorder swaps sixes/nines and fives/threes in damage numbers and ability costs. He says fans have been excitedly pitching ideas for how to represent their own disorders.

Mewgenics steeps you in that '90s kind of edginess that revels in the world's flaws: grime, disease, decay, senseless violence and general stupidity. It's the stuff I grew up with as a teenage fan of Newgrounds games and Jhonen Vasquez comics like Johnny The Homicidal Maniac, but McMillen hears younger onlookers wondering why his art is so 'ugly' and questioning whether it's OK for the game's title to reference eugenics. "It's not like the game is saying it's a good thing," he says to that.

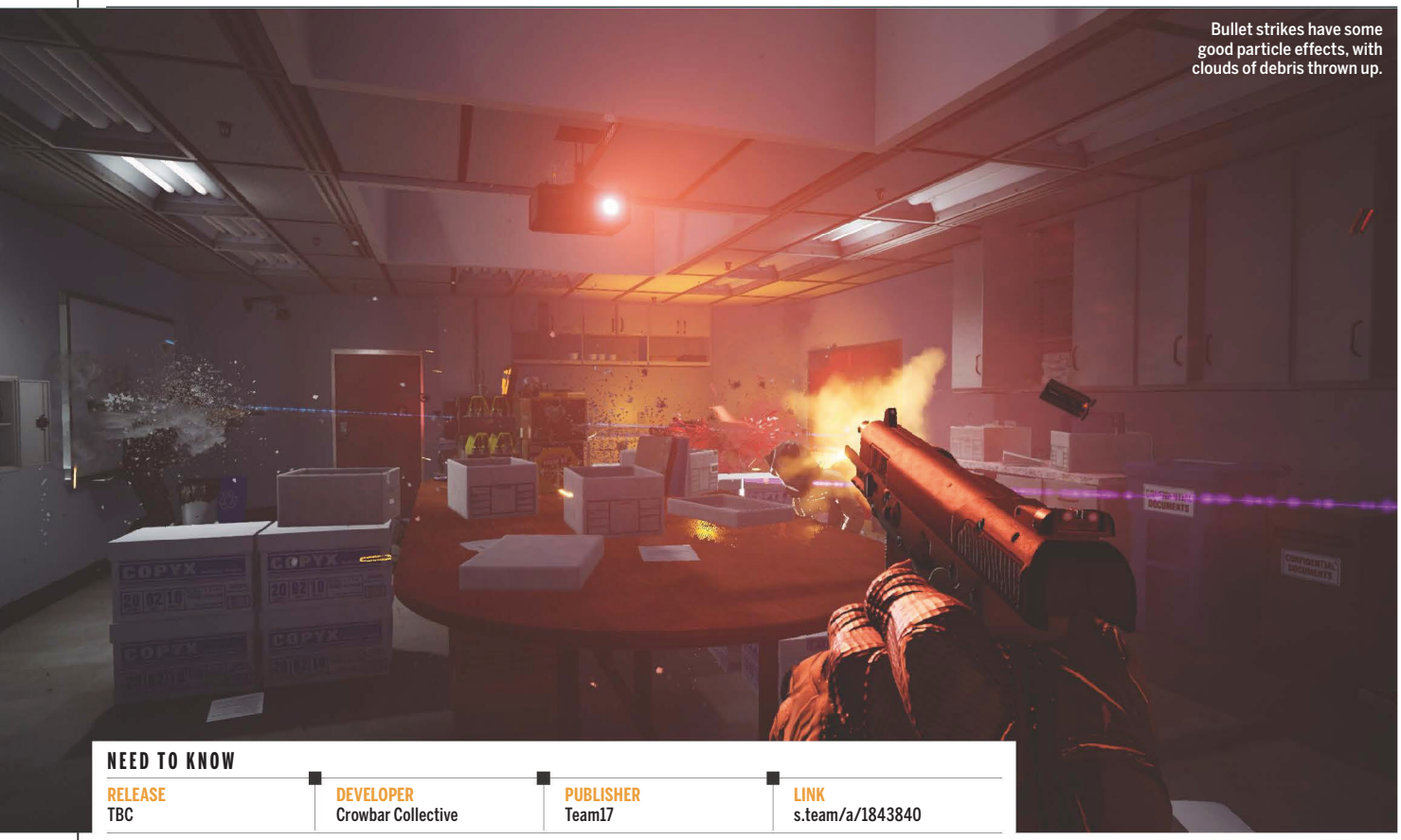
As for the art, they're still using Flash for its distinctive style of vector animation, though the software's called Adobe Animate now, since the Flash browser plugin is long gone. The world's changed since McMillen was making inflammatory Flash games like *Clubby the Seal*, but *Mewgenics* fits right into that oeuvre, and I think he might be right when he says it's his best game yet.

Tyler Wilde

ABOVE: Just about everything on a battle map does something.

LEFT: The adventure spans multiple regions and bosses.

By Ian Evenden



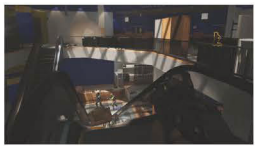
Bullet strikes have some good particle effects, with clouds of debris thrown up.

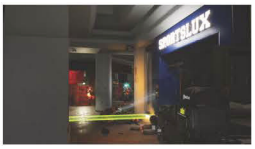
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBC	Crowbar Collective	Team17	s.team/a/1843840

ROGUE POINT

Tactical shooting over the rainbow





Presumably the name *Tom Clancy's Syndicate* was already taken, as *Rogue Point* takes the *Rainbow Six* template and fills it with mercenary goons working for rival corporations. They're not cybernetically enhanced – at least not in the demo build – as *Rogue Point* takes a more realistic approach to its corpo-combat.

PLAYED IT

This means you'll die easily, and as with other team-based tactical shooters you'll need a mix of planning, communication and teamwork to make it through the mission alive. Blasting the first merc you see with a shotgun may be effective in the short term, but this just means his boss inside is alerted, and will shoot you with unerring accuracy through the window while more bad guys (who come in various forms, including snipers and a berserkers who run straight at you with a machete) flank round the side of the building and you're on the floor a few seconds later, a failure message being broadcast from your computer speakers.

And that's going to be a frequent occurrence unless you're playing as a tight team that can cover all the angles. *Rogue Point* takes you through planning and kitting-out stages before dropping you into the level, where you can spend cash earned from dropping mercs in earlier missions (and, importantly for the early game, in training) to upgrade your weapons and equipment – including dead drops that offer a chance at getting a weapon you can't get any other way. When even a first-aid kit costs $100, every cent counts, and as it's not a game designed to be played solo (and there are no bots to add to a team with free slots) you'll spend a good chunk of time here making sure everyone has the optimal loadout.

WHEN EVEN A FIRST-AID KIT COSTS $100, EVERY PENNY COUNTS

MALL OR NOTHING

There are currently four environments to hunt mercs in, with an airport, shopping mall and office joined by an oil rig. So far, so *Rainbow Six: Vegas*, *Ready or Not* and bits of *CoD*, and what look like very straightforward tactical missions in pursuit of bad guys with ever-higher star ratings and prices on their heads. There's a 'parametric' design system at work here that evolves the environments as you play, switching the position of intel drops and even their layout each time you play, so that they don't get old so quickly despite their limited number.

Whether a small amount of randomness in the levels is enough to prevent them from getting stale remains to be seen, but there's plenty of scope for upgrading your operator following a successful merc hunt thanks to skill upgrades. These enable team-building and longer-term play, so if a flow of new levels is forthcoming after launch, this could lay siege to Ubisoft's tactical base.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBA	Willis Studios	Willis Studios	s.team/a/3445040

BELLE CITIQUE

Taking the stress out of city building

Utterly charming, this relaxed city design game lets you build and rebuild without needing to worry about resources. There's a big dollop of *Townscaper* in both the way it looks and plays, and if it can maintain these levels of chill and enchantment could be a great new addition to the genre.

The island is a paradise. Bisected by a canal, it's a maze of plazas, parks, trees and housing, topped by a stone castle keep on the highest part. Villagers keep joining the burgeoning settlement, as do dogs, cats, ravens, sparrows and watchmen, and they often comment on how much they love the trees. It's not quite clear where they're coming from, as no boats arrive, but I'm glad they're here anyway.

They also keep telling me they want more keeps, even though there's nothing to defend against and it would spoil the charm of the place to add another fortification when there could be picturesque waterside housing in between the parkland and the coast, or a glorious fountain just outside their front doors.

A ROOM WITH A VIEW

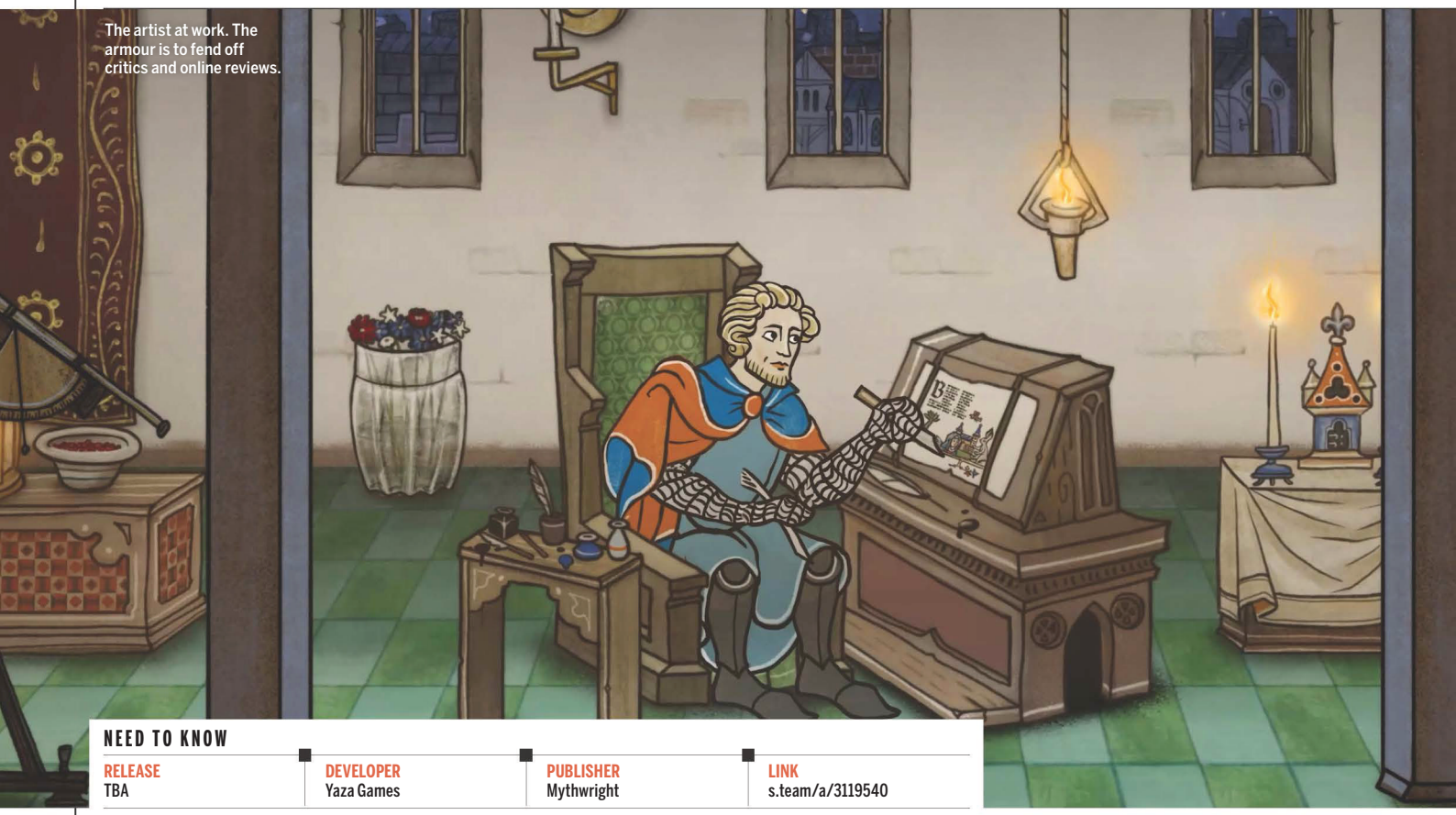
Still, you've got to give the people what they want, so up it goes, this time with a different style of roof in a new colour in defiance of whatever planning regulations exist in this idyllic place. Eventually, you can unlock many more things to build, and it's satisfying to see your buildings link up across the landscape's organic grid – which can be toggled on and off – and a bit frustrating when they just won't do it.

PLAYED IT

The game is a far cry from its developer's previous effort, 2023's dark fantasy deck-building ARPG *Halls of Watershot*, presenting a sunny world with little to worry you besides the snap of the grid and the requests of your population.

"Woof, woof, woof," says Bailey the dog, clearly in need of more parks to roam and chase squirrels in. And I agree wholeheartedly with him, but people keep demanding new keeps, buddy, so we have to build them.

By Ian Evenden



The artist at work. The armour is to fend off critics and online reviews.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBA	Yaza Games	Mythwright	s.team/a/3119540

SCRIPTORIUM: MASTER OF MANUSCRIPTS

Illuminate your life with assorted dark-age bums

There's very little that is funnier than a medieval illustrator trying to draw a horse they've never seen from an unaccustomed angle, and the developers of *Scriptorium* understand this. And they should, having released turn-based donkey-farting simulator and all-round good time *Inkulinati* way back at the beginning of 2024.

PLAYED IT

This time around, you're creating the illustrations. "It would be an honour," exclaims our illustrator, a demure young lady, in response to a retired knight's request to draw a beast. "Although I've never seen one..."

So we start with a Great African Beast, with legs like oaks, a nose like a branch, and some big teeth. Getting to work, I use the body and head of a donkey as a base, with a literal branch hanging off the front (I know illustrators who use similes, and they're all cowards) plus dragon legs. It has some sort of ears, a tail, and is stomping over some buildings about a third of its size. For good measure, I print the word 'Beast' in the background. The knight is pleased, calling it "realistic" and claiming it "pierces the heart". I am less convinced of its verisimilitude, but then I have several centuries of cynicism and wildlife documentaries clouding my view.

DARKER AGES

A neat feature is that you can save your creations as PNG files to your desktop, ready for hilarious social media sharing. Only at this point do I notice that the beast doesn't have any eyes, and that there's a cheeky naked man at the bottom of the frame. Clearly, the illustrator isn't that demure.

A NEAT FEATURE IS YOU CAN SAVE YOUR CREATIONS AS FILES TO YOUR DESKTOP

And speaking of which, an elderly hermit wants her to draw his life story, full of satanic temptations. He wants to begin with a rainstorm, an ark and some animals, some of which are showing their bums but are otherwise free of devilment. He promises a five-star review.

Next is a romance: a blacksmith's daughter, a cemetery rendezvous, and a bout of nervous diarrhoea so bad it causes the dead to rise. You can use the gold you earn from commissions to buy new licentious illustrations (much like being a freelance magazine writer) and use them in your pictures, so I pick a lovely young lady and something unidentified but brown from the food section to go with this tale of woe.

Scriptorium is a lot of fun, as you assemble ridiculous pictures from a limited palette of parts to match what your clients want. You earn gold, expand your workshop, and try to get your work in front of the queen herself for a bit of royal patronage. The demo on Steam contains 17 commissions as well as a sandbox mode, but we don't currently have a release date for the full game.

These guys can't be too dangerous, can they?

FEROCIOUS

You didn't ask for reality, you asked for more teeth

With Jurassic Park back in the cinemas and not doing too badly, what better time to start running and screaming from dinosaurs? And so it goes, as you're shipwrecked on a mysterious island and asked to survive in the face of human mercenaries with guns as well as actual living dinos.

The cretaceous creatures aren't always hostile. They're wild animals, but thanks to a device provided by a disaffected employee of the company that's behind both the reincarnated monsters and the mercs, you can attempt to communicate with them, control them to attack your enemies, or send them through small gaps to open new paths and sneak around the bad guys. There's even a baby T-rex.

This is tempered with the usual busywork of the survival game – foraging for materials, crafting everything from bandages to weapons, searching for food and trying to stay out of the way until you're kitted out well enough to be dangerous. It's a good-looking FPS with some sharp dino models, and there's a demo on Steam.

FIRST LOOK

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBA	OMYOG	tinyBuild	s.team/a/1645630

Discounty is the name of your shop as well as the title of the game.

PLAYED IT

DISCOUNTY

Sell cheap food to heal a community

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
August 21	Crinkle Cut Games	PQube	s.team/a/2274620

Stardew Valley except you're Pierre and people like you. Your store is a discount supermarket in a pixel-art village, selling cheap unlike the high prices charged in Pelican Town (though you do have a monopoly), and it's up to you to lay it out, decide what stock you'll carry, and how you'll expand the business in the face of local opposition to a newcomer. Of course you'll be able to win them around with good service.

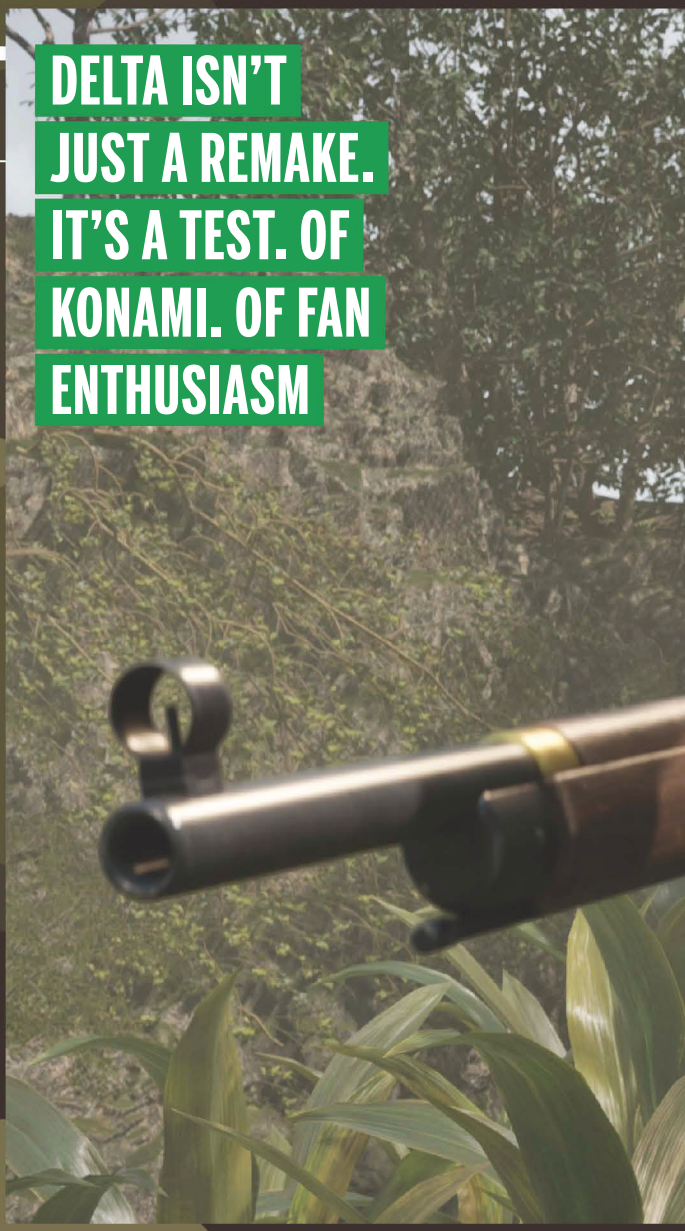
!
FOX

A KEPT YOU WAITING HUH?

Can METAL GEAR SOLID DELTA: SNAKE EATER make the fanbase whole again?

By Joshua Wolens

DELTA ISN'T JUST A REMAKE. IT'S A TEST. OF KONAMI. OF FAN ENTHUSIASM



It's all a little bit *Metal Gear*: the same basic story with some of the characters swapped out. Twenty-one years ago, *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* released to a divided fanbase, still roiling in its reaction to the then-controversial, now-classic *Metal Gear Solid 2*.

They didn't like the switcheroo. They wanted to be Solid Snake; they got Raiden. They wanted a high-tech spy thriller; they got a bizarre meditation on information in the age of the internet. They wanted Mei Ling and her big book of apropos quotes; they got Rose and her constant needling about emotional distance and the significance of tomorrow's date – which was April 30, in case you forgot. They got something they didn't sign up for, and it left them feeling frustrated, hoodwinked.

MGS 3 pulled it all back together, and it even did it without giving fans what they thought they wanted. You still weren't Solid Snake, the spy thriller was decidedly low-tech, and rather than a continuation of the tale set up in *MGS 1* it pitched us all the way back to 1964 and the, um, sweltering jungles of Russia. But it worked. Players loved it, and even those who adored *MGS 2* found something to treasure in the third game's personal tale of a spy on a quest to kill the person he loves most in the world.

Two decades on and here we are again, with a fanbase fractured by the fracas surrounding *Metal Gear Solid 5*. They lament its missing chapters, its strange twists, its retcons, the absence of series mainstay David Hayter as the English voice of Snake, but most of all they lament the events surrounding it: the acrimonious departure of Hideo Kojima – a name still synonymous with the *Metal Gear* series he created ten years after he left – from Konami. Can *Metal Gear Solid Delta: Snake Eater* pull off the same trick again, and reunite a scattered fanbase?

THE BOSS' WILL

"*Metal Gear* 3, really, is my favourite game in the series," says Hayter, firmly back in the hot seat as Snake after *MGS 5*'s strange interlude swapped him out for Kiefer Sutherland. "It just really dialled down into what Snake is about, what *Metal Gear* is about, and now it's been, what – ten years since the last *Metal Gear* game? Yeah, I really hope people will rally around."

But for all its similarities to *MGS 3*'s release, *Delta* has even tougher challenges to overcome. Whatever they felt about *MGS 2*, no fan in the early '00s doubted Kojima's ability to make a *Metal Gear* game. Today, players wonder if Konami's up to stewarding the series without his hand on the tiller, especially with its reputation still marked by the lingering damage of his explosive departure.

BELOW: Gigantic nuclear-armed tanks can be shot at with a rifle, if you like.

So *Delta* isn't just a remake. It's a test. Of Konami. Of fan enthusiasm. Of the entire concept of *MGS* – not just a game, but a series – without Kojima at the helm (discounting the unloved, early, and now quietly forgotten attempt that was *Metal Gear Survive*). It's the studio shaking out the cobwebs and flexing its fingers, trying to see if it can get a feel for operating in this world without the man whose presence lingers at the studio even a decade after he left, haunting it like some kind of, ah, phantasmal ache.

Perhaps that explains Konami's almost religious sensibility towards the remake, where the desire not to tinker, not to tweak, not to leave a hair out of place from the original game seeps from every hyper-detailed, 4K pore. "When we began production of *Metal Gear Solid Delta:*

Snake Eater, we spent an enormous amount of time discussing what direction to take with the remake," says *Metal Gear* series producer Noriaki Okamura.

"We debated what parts to change and what parts to leave unchanged." In the end? The answer was to not change much outside of the tech.

"Regarding game design and scenario, we decided to faithfully reproduce the original dev members' intentions to the point of being overly faithful, as these elements are universal and timeless."

Rather than a swingeing, *Resident Evil 2*-style overhaul, "Our guiding principle was to update the graphics and controls to reflect the evolution of gaming over the past 20 years, ensuring that today's players would find the game enjoyable to play."

So far as Okamura is concerned, the original is too sacred to touch, to even consider touching. When I asked what he would change if – in some hypothetical universe – he were instead making a true, sweeping overhaul of the original, he said, "I think we'd probably come to the same conclusion. I don't feel like there's a need to change the game design or storyline for *MGS 3*."

It's hard to know how seriously to take that, as an outsider. No doubt Okamura and the wider Konami team have genuine respect for the original game, but is it really too holy to brook any improvement at all? It's interesting to contrast Okamura's clear reverence for *MGS 3* with the attitude of Hayter, its star. Unlike modern-day Konami, Hayter is under absolutely no burden to prove himself worthy of the *Metal Gear* legacy. Indeed, his acting across the series is a key part of that legacy already, and

ABOVE: Either the best boss fight in history or the quickest. Your choice.

SNAKES AND LADS

The VIPs of Delta

NAKED SNAKE
The man of the hour. Dispatched to Russia on a mission to save the Earth. Will absolutely never process the trauma.

THE BOSS
A true patriot. Or she was until she defected to the Soviet Union. That was a mark on her record, sure.

OCELOT
Weird gunfighting cat boy, also The Boss's son. Probably won't become a series staple who is also a cowboy later.

VOLGIN
Coup-plotting Russian and *MGS 3*'s main villain. Also has lightning powers, which probably helps with the first thing.

» speaking honestly? If he were given a chance to revise his old performance, he might take it.

"I hate to say this, but I feel like I'm a better actor now than I was then," says Hayter. "I mean [my performance] is unusual, and I think that captures a certain moment in time that I'm glad they're recreating, but if I was to do it again, I would probably have a slightly better grasp and control of what I wanted to do with it."

It's driven home in the remake by the new, modernised graphical style, with its hyper-realistic men who shoot bees and very angry astronauts: "There was always this strangeness that rode through it, and so Snake's voice isn't necessarily designed to be fully real. In a way, it's got a bit of anime to it." Does that play with a new, 'photo-real' face? "I think there's a little incongruousness," says Hayter, "and I probably would have grounded it a little more, but that's the fun of the character, so I think it'll work".

So Konami's dedication is doubtlessly real, but its sheer

ABOVE: Enormous gunfights are a key part of stealth.

BEE SERIOUS

Combat essentials for the apiarist on the go

1 WEAR A MASK
This way people won't be able to identify you, even though you are clearly Gary, the only man accompanied by 400,000 bees.

2 ADD A DASH OF COLOUR
Yellow is in this season! Just because it's the Cold War doesn't mean you can't be hot to trot.

3 BEES
No, really. Just carry those bees around with you everywhere you go. You'd be amazed how many problems you can solve with bees.

THE FOX ENGINE IS A RELIC OF THE KOJIMA ERA

fanaticism might be, perhaps, a little rhetorical: more about walking on eggshells around a disgruntled fandom than about *MGS 3* being a truly perfect game.

BELOW: *Snake Eater*'s femmes are appropriately fatale.

IT HAS TO BE THIS WAY

After all, it's not like there are no changes in the remake. *Delta* incorporates a crouchwalk that was previously a 3DS-only mechanic (the '00s were a hell of a time), folding new and previously cutscene-only animations into Snake's deck of CQC moves, even – in the game's New style mode, which features more tweaks and changes over its Legacy style mode – new pin-up posters. Well, new-old pin-up posters.

"The game stages feature posters of real-life individuals," says Yuji Korekado, creative producer. "We reached out to the individuals who appeared in the original game and asked if we could use their current photos, and to our delight, everyone kindly agreed. As a result, we were able to use photos that each individual selected, showcasing their current selves." Flick over to New style and you get these kinds of delicate, art-restorer-style tweaks, "Major changes include the title screen, the opening movie by Kyle Cooper, and the singing by Cynthia Harrell, allowing you to enjoy both the old and new versions," promises Korekado.

Strangely, it's the aside about the posters more than the scorching UE5-ness that excites me for *Delta* – it's exactly the kind of absurd, minor detail that would have gotten undue attention in the development of the original. A resurrection of the spirit, not the flesh.

But old-fashioned loyalists needn't fear: the flesh is very much there, it's just ray-traced now, with a particular emphasis on "realistic lighting, including indirect light, and [conveying] the density and realism of natural objects," says Korekado.

It does raise a question, though: why not the Fox Engine, used in both *MGS 5* and *Metal Gear Survive*, which has already proved itself capable of shouldering a full-scale *MGS* game? To hear Korekado tell it, it's mostly down to magical leaf tech, "The Lumen and Nanite technologies newly adopted in UE5 were deemed suitable for achieving these goals, leading to the decision to adopt UE5."

But the symbolism is hard to ignore. The Fox Engine is a relic of the Kojima era, created in-house at Kojima Productions. It's difficult to imagine a world in which Konami willingly conjured those old ghosts even if UE5 didn't have whizzbang leaf tech; this is its big stab at showing it can do *Metal Gear* without Kojima.

INDISPENSABLE MEN

It is, admittedly, a little unfair. For as much as we (and I, in this very article) use Hideo Kojima and the developers on the *Metal Gear* series almost interchangeably, the truth is that Konami is still home to a number of devs who toiled on the series and made their mark on it over the years – Okamura and Korekado included.

But that number can only ever decrease. "Years have passed since [the release of the last new *Metal Gear*]," says Okamura, "and the number of members who had worked on the *MGS* series alongside the original staff had dwindled within the company." It was this realisation, says Okamura, that led Konami to return to the series, "I felt that if we were going to reboot the *MGS* series, now was the time."

Well, perhaps the business reasons helped a little, as prosaic as they are. "I was thrilled when I heard [*Metal Gear*] was coming back," says Hayter. "Was I surprised? I don't know... Most games when they're 27, 28 years old, they fade away... but I live this every day. I go to Comic Cons and I talk to fans, and there's always been new people coming into it... and I mean, I work in Hollywood, so I know that it's profitable, you know? It's a profitable title. A wise company is going to bring that back."

But when Okamura and Korekado speak about it, *Delta* seems like just as much an opportunity for Konami to fill those widening gaps in its

MAKING THE MAN
Like the OG, Snake's uniform will change depending on your camo. Unlike the OG, his body will also change depending on how many wounds you've accumulated.
ENEMIES OF THE STATE
Snake's enemies include GRU soldiers, KGB agents, WWII heroes, a very old man with a rifle, crocodiles, the common cold and hunger. Good luck.
SNAKE

"I'VE BEEN A WORKING SCREENWRITER FOR 26 STRAIGHT YEARS"

institutional knowledge as it is about anything else. "With many of the original staff members now pursuing new paths, we are aware that there are still elements lacking in our ability to fill the gaps left by their departure," says Okamura, putting the team that remains in a tricky spot when it ever gets the notion to "create a new *MGS* game that builds upon their legacy". If there's a lesson to *Metal Gear Survive*, perhaps it's what happens when Konami tries to leap directly into a brand-new *Metal Gear* without taking the time to nail the fundamentals. Because those fundamentals are, well, pretty weird.

SINGULAR VOICE

"I've been a working screenwriter for 26 straight years," says Hayter, "and written on countless pieces, and I think I'm pretty good at it. But I look at the *Metal Gear* scripts, and I'm like, 'I could never do this'. That's a singular voice... the tone of it, the execution of it is something beautiful that isn't done the way I would do it."

It's why a remake makes sense. Trying to replicate that distinct voice in something new would be doomed from the start. On the other hand, trying to get players to accept a wholly new *Metal Gear* with an entirely new vibe and perspective would probably be like trying to

bath a cat. Plus, hey, its themes remain discomfortingly relevant. "Even now, as we continue to produce this work, we are constantly amazed by the foresight and universality of the original dev members," says Okamura.

Hayter agrees, "There's so many things not necessarily predicted in *Metal Gear*, but anticipated," he says. "So the fact that we are in a similar spot with Russia, for example, as we were back during the Cold War: it's not necessarily a surprise... but that's *Metal Gear* – you get a kickass adventure, but then you also get a lesson in nuclear fission, nuclear fusion, artificial intelligence, what have you."

For now, caution in abundance: crossing the river by touching the stones. Perhaps that explains why *Delta* didn't – as was rumoured – release in time for the original's 20th anniversary in 2024, even though press got a hands-on with the Virtuous Mission in August of that year.

Did the experience of the *Master Collection*, which came out part-baked in 2023 and was only brought up to snuff by a series of patches the following year, give Konami pause? The company is keeping characteristically schtum. Though Okamura says, "The team members »

DESPITE THEIR CAREFULNESS, OKAMURA AND CO ARE OF COURSE THINKING ABOUT WHAT'S NEXT

worked hard to create many additional features beyond the Virtuous Mission that players experienced at the time. We believe that we have now reached a point where we feel we have accomplished what we set out to do."

Regardless, despite their carefulness, Okamura and co are of course thinking about what's next. "Through the development of *MGS Delta*, we have also gained a new sense of what our team is capable of," he says. Is that a brand-new *MGS*? No. Or not yet, anyway. But it might be a future remake that takes bigger swings, that's willing to make deeper and weirder cuts to its source material. "By creating remakes with stronger originality in different directions or entirely new types of works, we may be able to expand our creative horizons."

So probably no *MGS 6* any time soon, sounds like. But an *MGS 1* remake? Or 2? Maybe even *Metal Gear 1* and *2*? Konami isn't saying, but it seems well within the realms of possibility, at least if fans don't

ABOVE: Firing rockets at helicopters: also stealth.

SHIFTING GEAR

Which MGS needs remaking next?

METAL GEAR SOLID

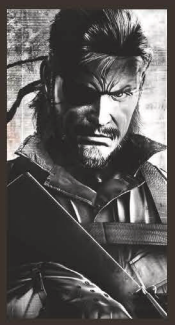
An obvious choice. The OG 3D *Metal Gear* feels a little creaky these days, and with GameCube remake *The Twin Snakes* presumably trapped in Nintendo jail, maybe it's time to just re-remake the damn thing.

METAL GEAR

The connoisseur's choice. *Metal Gear* is an astoundingly basic top-down stealther from the '80s. There's a lot a remake could do to make it more fun, but also a whole bunch of necessary creative swings Konami might not want to take yet.

METAL GEAR SOLID 2

The game most similar to *MGS 3* might be a natural follow-on from a remake of that game. Plus, all its dark foreboding about the internet destroying our brains is more relevant than ever.



MGS: PEACE WALKER

Now we're talking. Take *MGS 5*, swap out the grimdark of 1984 for a 'Naked Snake goes to the Caribbean' Saturday morning cartoon, and you have *Peace Walker*. Doesn't that sound like the greatest game ever?

ABOVE: Pretty. Traumatised.

outright reject *Delta*. Will the series ever be the same? That thing from 20 years ago you fell in love with on a PS2 or a very rickety PC port?

Outside of remakes, the simple answer is no. "I think it's absolutely possible [to make a great brand-new *Metal Gear*]," says Hayter. "Will it be the same? No. There's no way to replicate [Kojima's] exact genius, his exact weirdness, his specific personality."

I wonder if acclimatising fans to that fact when they spent years waiting for someone to pull off some sort of grand reveal of the missing parts of *MGS 5* isn't part of Konami's plan. "I think there's a way to do a different generation of games," says Hayter. "When I was a kid, I loved Tim Burton's Batman, and was like, 'That's how Batman should be done.' And then Chris Nolan does Batman, and you're like, 'Oh, that's pretty badass as well.' So will it be the same? No. Could it be amazing? Sure."

Whether fans take to the remake or not, *Metal Gear*'s resurrection is a fascinating thing to watch. Konami has to navigate multiple paradoxes: it's *Metal Gear*'s steward and advocate, but can barely ever bring itself to say the name of the man whose name is on the original box. It wants to win over wayward fans, but the series is famous for hardly ever giving players what they thought they wanted from each entry. And, of course, Konami – and especially Okamura – wants to preserve *MGS* for future generations. Doesn't a dazzling new remake run the risk of supplanting the original?

THIS IS GOOD, ISN'T IT?

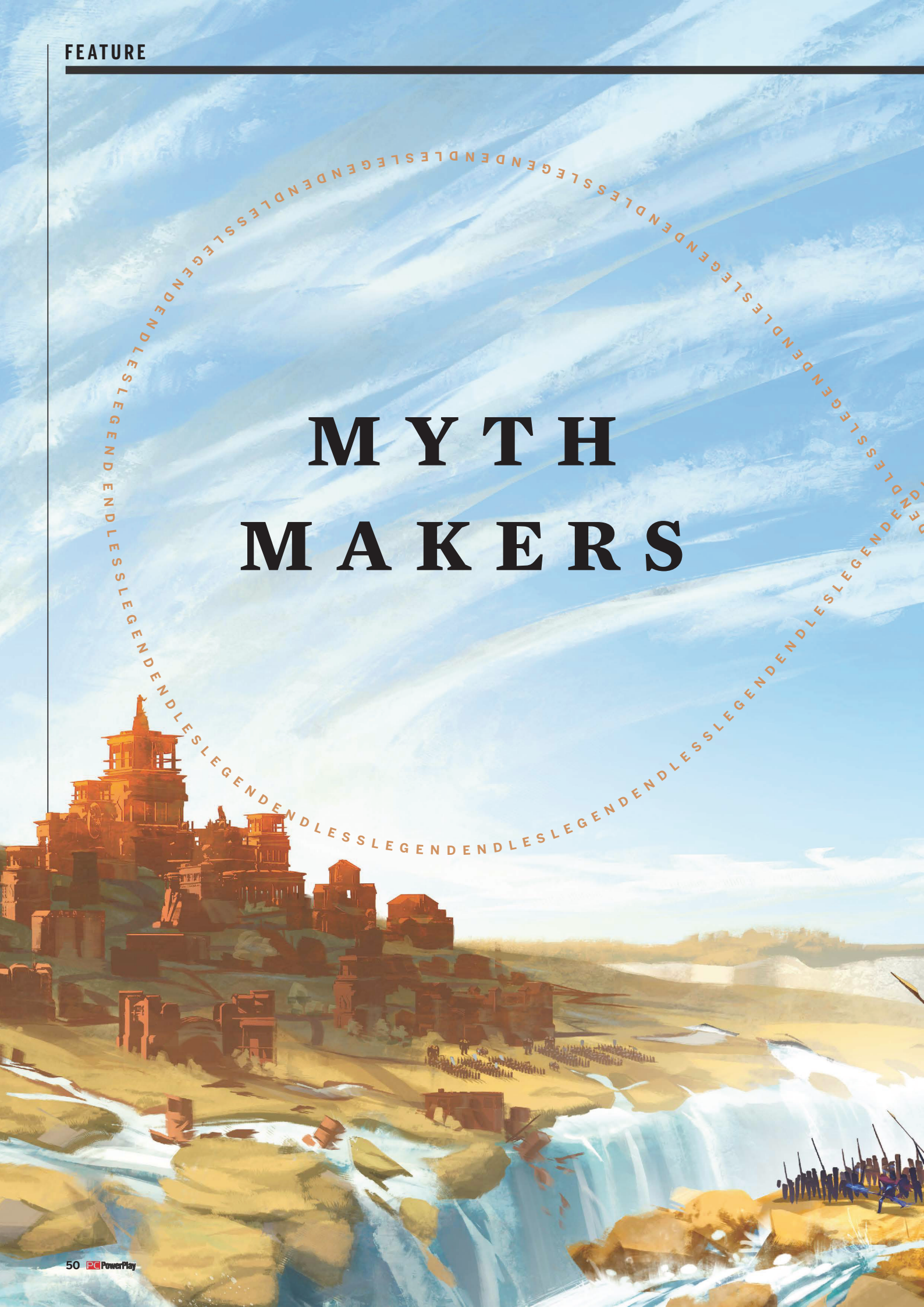
For that last one, at least, there is an answer. Asked if he envisions *Delta* as a complement to the original *MGS 3* or a replacement for it, Okamura says, "Both. For this reason, we have prepared both the original, *Master Collection* version and the remake, *MGS Delta*. For new users who are just getting started with the MGS series, *MGS Delta* may be more familiar. For long-time MGS series fans, the *Master Collection* version may feel superior." When it comes to picking your *Metal Gear*, Okamura's philosophy is simple, "We would like to leave that decision up to the players themselves."

"I was literally playing the original *Metal Gear Solid* a couple days ago, and it's still a banger," says Hayter. "So will [*Delta*] replace [*MGS 3*]? I don't know. I just think it's a different, upgraded version."

It's the most exciting time to be a *Metal Gear* fan in years. With *Delta* imminent and a *Master Collection* Vol 2 somewhere out there on a Konami hard drive, we're eating like we haven't been able to in almost a decade. Will all this end up with a renaissance; a whole new series of games? That's on you and me.

"We are wondering whether our new team should continue making *MGS* series [games]," says Okamura. "We believe that *MGS Delta* is a test of that. This is the best we can do at this point. If you continue to place your trust in us and allow us to move forward, we believe that will be the 'success' of *Delta*." ■

MYTH MAKERS


ENDLESSLEGENDENDLESSLEGENDENDLESSLEGEND

By Ian Evenden

Asymmetric fantasy 4X **ENDLESS LEGEND 2** parts the murky waters to unveil a new world, new factions, and a new way of revealing the map

Welcome to Saiadha. It's nice here. There's plenty of coastal real estate for refugees from Auriga to build a new life, rich in resources and blissfully separated by sea channels from other races who might be looking for a fight. There are none of the harsh winters of the first *Endless Legend*'s setting, but this new planet does have some meteorological quirks of its own.

Endless Legend 2, Amplitude Studios' new 4X which will be heading into Early Access this September, with a demo available on Steam by the time you read this, picks up after the first game, with the survivors of a hasty exit from its frozen planet – some familiar, some new – landing on an ocean world and having to deal with their new home's idiosyncrasies as well as one another.

Beside the setting, there's a lot that's new about *Endless Legend 2*. It's been 11 years since the original game, and in that time Amplitude has released four full games and joined and left publisher Sega – *Endless Legend 2* will be published by Hooded Horse. It's lost one of its founders (Mathieu Girard, who would go on to release *Solasta: Crown of the Magister*) and continue to attract talent from across the world.

It's something the game's director Derek Paxton, aka 'Kael', knows a bit about. He's new to the *Endless* series, having moved to Paris just to work on the game, but having started making games with *Fall from Heaven*, a total conversion for *Sid Meier's Civilization IV*, released back in 2005. Paxton was then a design consultant on expansion pack *Sid Meier's Civilization IV: Beyond the Sword*, and was also involved with *Sid Meier's Civilization IV: Colonization*. He later worked with Stardock on *Elemental: War of Magic*, *Fallen Enchantress* and *Sins of a Solar Empire: Rebellion*, and was lead designer of *Elemental: Fallen Enchantress* in 2012.

THE FRENCH DEVELOPER HAS PUT OUT FIVE PREVIOUS ENDLESS TITLES

So it's a bit of an understatement when Paxton starts our interview with "I've been making 4X strategy games for a while." The same could be said of Amplitude itself. Formed in 2011 by a couple of former Ubisoft employees, the French developer has put out five previous *Endless* titles as well as *Humankind*, 2021's 4X that took a less fantastical view of history. All of these games are filtering into *Endless Legend 2* in some way.

"I really love that Amplitude has kind of pulled the best pieces out of *Endless Space 2* and *Humankind* to make *Endless Legend 2* better," says Paxton. "*Endless Legend* was a great game of course, but in *Endless Space 2*, Amplitude added this system to have divergent quests, quest branching that can happen. So there's a quest that you're presented with, but you as a player have multiple ways that you may want to handle it. You get to pick your objective. That was carried forward into *Endless Legend 2* from the narrative and quest side. And on *Humankind*, the battle system is the big thing. Battles were decisive in *Endless Legend*, they were very streamlined, and players absolutely gave a lot of feedback that they wanted more depth and detail there."

BELOW: Seasons change, but *Endless Legend 2*'s world looks great in the autumn.

Last Lords have a beaten up appearance.

THE LAST LORDS

1 Once noble knights, the Last Lords are now cursed beings of pure Dust, their souls trapped inside hollow suits of armour. No longer needing food, their population does not grow naturally. Instead, new Last Lords must be awakened with resources or by drawing others to their cities. Few survived the exodus from Auriga, and players must gather Dust to revive more and determine their fate. Now Consul Tyabana and her council must find a way to restore the rest of their people and either find a way to cure their curse or embrace their vampiric nature.

The Last Lords affect Saiadha in unique ways. They can create estates in villages of minor factions, using them for taxation, labour, or as a source of life energy to resurrect others – particularly powerful beings known as Primordials.

The Last Lords offer a well-rounded army composition, with a solid infantry core, ranged support, and powerful cavalry. However, Lords armies can prove tough thanks to abilities that allow them to heal in battle by leeching life from their enemies. Their true strength emerges when the seas retreat and more opportunities arise to awaken their slumbering kin. Strategic Dust harvesting from local populations is key to turning these warriors into the unchallenged rulers of Saiadha.

The Necrophage have burrowed underground.

NECROPHAGE

2 The Necrophage are one of the most aggressive and relentless factions. Their entire economy is centred around a single city ruled by their Queen. Unlike other factions, they do not rely on diplomacy or alliances – only conquest. Their forces feed on the land and their enemies, turning the battlefield into a resource for expansion and survival.

Though restricted to a single city, the Necrophage can construct a vast network of tunnels, allowing their units to move swiftly across regions. These tunnels enable strategic flexibility and make it possible to strike from unexpected directions. Even without founding new cities, the Necrophage can control territory by seizing regions and funnelling resources to their capital.

Their military focuses on overwhelming force. Most units are designed to deal increasing damage and to hunt wounded or isolated targets. Some have surprising durability, but the true strength of the Necrophage lies in their numbers and adaptability. Even heavy casualties are quickly replaced by larvae, which can evolve into powerful units directly on the front lines. Driven by instinct and hunger, the Necrophage see other factions as prey. Every battle fuels their economy, every corpse feeds the swarm – and peace is never an option.

INTO THE DEEP

Depth and detail are two things Amplitude is known for, and as you watch *Endless Legend 2* in action you can spot the dense forests and open plains of the starting islands as they emerge from the fog while your units explore. The islands aren't large at the beginning of the game, and there's a very good reason for that.

This new world of Saiadha is an ocean planet, at least to begin with. In the same way the first *Endless Legend*'s Auriga had an issue with winter, a season that made life much harder for the game's races and which got worse as the turns went by, Saiadha has a monsoon.

And just as the Earth version of the monsoon is a bit more than a rainstorm, so it goes on Saiadha. Darkness blankets the land for long periods of time as howling winds and pouring rain drive the newly arrived factions back to their cities. At the same time, special items that restore movement to armies and fill up your reserves of Dust appear, while minor factions become unusually aggressive. It can be a time to head out and do some conquering, or perhaps raise your defences and fend off what you know is coming.

Then, when it's all over, the world has changed. The ocean, which at the beginning of the game separates the players on islands they can't leave, recedes, revealing land bridges to other areas and fertile new plains ready to be exploited.

"There was a temptation there at the beginning to have it set in the same world as *Endless Legend*," says Paxton of the decision to move to a new planet. "From a story perspective, it would have been a little hard because that world is completely frozen over at the end of *Endless Legend*, but you could have made that work from a narrative standpoint. The real thing is, we wanted to provide a new experience for the player. We want to provide new species that you're interacting with and get to play as. We wanted new pressures to be put on the player and new decisions to be made."

The retreat of the oceans is known in-game as Tidefall, and it's a one-way process. "Just like winter would come and go in *Endless Legend*, here the oceans recede," says Paxton. "But they don't recede and come back, because there's two things we really wanted to change from *Endless Legend* here, one of which is that we wanted this mechanic to be something that changed the world forever.

"Winter would come and go [in *Endless Legend 1*], but the world would be left like it was when it's done. Here, we wanted the world change to happen and we wanted the map to forever bear the marks of that change. So, the ocean goes down, and then when the second Tidefall happens, the ocean goes down again and more and more land is exposed. You may have a land bridge that now connects two islands, you may have some new resources or enemies that are revealed from that, and you have to adjust your game. Your city that was safely protected and had choke points to it that you had blocked off may not be that way after the Tidefall happens.

DARKNESS BLANKETS THE LAND FOR LONG PERIODS OF TIME

"I really like the Tidefall mechanic for keeping it interesting and having the map change," says Paxton. "I'm one of these players who was a lot more interested in the very beginning of 4X games, so I'd start a lot of games of *Civ*, but I wouldn't always finish a lot of games of *Civ*."

COLD BREW

"The second big change that we really liked Tidefall for, more than winter, was that winter was largely punishing," continues Paxton. Indeed, the cold season in *Endless Legend* brought penalties to movement which slowed the game down, to resources so food and Dust production was reduced, and had faction-specific effects too. Players could mitigate its effects to some extent by using technologies, skill, and special districts built within their cities, but especially in the early game it added extra challenge to all the exploration and extermination.

"Tidefall is the opposite," says Paxton. "When these new lands are revealed, it gives new opportunities and the player has to rethink his decisions, but it also gives all these new opportunities for the player. There are new resources out there. There's a new place for the player to go grab and to found his next city. So we want it to feel like a prize for the player that has reached that stage of the game."

Which raises a rather obvious question: where's the water going? After all, if it's rushing through a dimensional portal to who-knows-where, or through a giant chasm into the interior of the planet, that's going to have a pretty big effect on the world. But Paxton isn't saying. "That is a big mystery as to what is happening as we go through the course of the game," he says. "There is certainly a lot going on in Saiadha beyond just the oceans going away."

You might think, with all the water sloshing around at the

BELOW: Creatures to ride are common, and some even fly.

beginning of the game, that naval warfare would be a major part of *Endless Legend 2*'s opening hours, but it's not to be. Paxton explains that not only are the oceans dangerous, but building up a large navy could lead to frustrations for the player: "We don't have any naval units in this game. We didn't want the player going down that path. We didn't want to create a faction based on that path only to have, by the end of the game, the oceans largely gone and a whole land revealed, and suddenly I have this big, massive navy and they're all in this four-hex pond that is all that is left of the starting oceans."

As amusing as a bunch of destroyers in a duckpond would be, you can see his point. Instead, the retreat of the waters opens up new lands, resources and even game mechanics. "At the first Tidefall, for example, you're going to find fortresses down there," says Paxton. "Fortresses have bosses that are controlling them, tyrants, and the tyrants may have henchmen that are guarding them, and you can't found [new cities] in any of the territories that have a fortress in them until you clear it out. There's also valuable items that can be found at fortresses for equipping your heroes.

"At the second Tidefall, we introduce the concept of doom wraiths and corruption, so you'll start to see these creatures start to appear in the world that corrupt the land around them. They won't actively attack the player, but what they will do is move into your territories and dig in, and start to corrupt the land. You'll start to see these black noxious fumes come up, and any cities that you have in those territories will begin to get penalties. They get larger and larger and larger over time, so the player has a choice about how he's going to deal with these creatures."

THE RETREAT OF THE WATERS OPENS UP NEW LANDS AND GAME MECHANICS

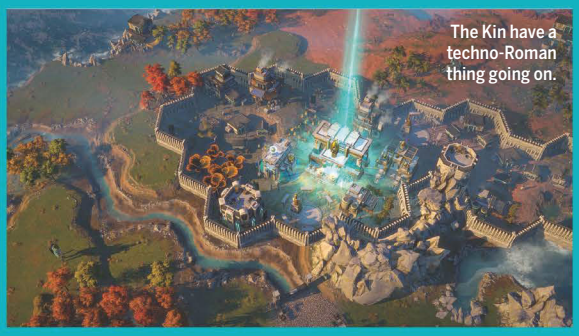
The Early Access release of the game will be singleplayer only, though you'll be able to gang up on the minor factions in multiplayer when the full release comes around. There's a reason for this, says Paxton, "Most of our players play singleplayer. We support multiplayer as we have in other *Endless* games, so if you wanna get together and play with your friends, that's fine. With the launch of Early Access we will be single player only just so we can focus all the feedback with players and get any issues taken care of, making sure that experience is great. But while we're in Early Access, before we release, we plan on putting out the multiplayer version so we can get players trying that out as well."

GREY ALL OVER

The asymmetric nature of an *Endless* game means that its factions all play very differently, and players may gravitate toward a favourite, perhaps one of the returning races from the previous game. None of them is exactly the good guys, however, as Amplitude prefers to deal in shades of grey rather than absolutes. There are some bad guys, however, "It's hard to find a good, cuddly spin to put on the Necrophage," says Paxton. "They want to go consume everything, um, they, they can eat the earth to get yields. They kill their enemies and use their cadavers to upgrade their city and their units.

"The Necrophage are a one-city faction, so they just have the hive of

BELOW: Saiadha is full of horrors, some of which crawl from the sea.



The Kin have a techno-Roman thing going on.

KIN OF SHEREDYN

3 Descended from interstellar explorers, the Kin of Sheredyn are a society determined to defend their homeland at any cost. Decades ago, they arrived on an ocean world with hopes of founding a colony, but were stranded on an isolated island instead. Battling relentless Necrophage attacks, survival became their mission.

Their legendary leader, Commander Garin, vanished while exploring ancient Endless ruins. Over time, she became a mythic figure among the Kin, with many believing in her prophesied return to deliver them from hardship.

Rooted in military tradition, the Kin field balanced and durable armies. Their unity is their strength – shields absorb damage while archers and cavalry strike decisively. Core units can specialise through branching upgrade paths, allowing tailored battlefield roles.

The Kin of Sheredyn embody a defensive playstyle. Their strength lies in industrial development and impregnable defenses. Fortresses and disciplined troops protect every inch of their territory. As their zeal grows, powerful bonuses become available. And when all seems lost, the Chosen can be summoned – elite warriors clad in devastating mech suits, capable of turning the tide with overwhelming force. Together, they stand unyielding against any foe.

Aspects wear coral as a sign of their wealth.

ASPECTS

4

The Aspects are a faction devoted to harmony, balance, and peaceful coexistence with the peoples of Saiadha. They live in symbiosis with a living coral that connects them through a vast psychic network called the Chorus, allowing them to communicate and reach consensus.

This unity was disrupted by a mysterious disaster known as the Great Dieback, which devastated the coral reefs and weakened many Aspects' connection to the Chorus. Now, they must nurture the coral back to health to restore their realm and help bring balance to the world once more.

Ideal for players who prefer economic growth and exploration over warfare, the Aspects expand not through traditional camps, but by placing coral spores. These spores spread across the map, turning tiles into coral-overgrown zones that offer vision, resource bonuses, and unique strategic advantages.

Diplomatically gifted, the Aspects can influence or even force treaties based on how much coral other empires exploit. Militarily, they focus on teamwork – units working in tandem to increase effectiveness. Their army includes scouts, archers, cavalry, and flying behemoths. Though peaceful by nature, the Aspects are capable of defending themselves if needed, and thrive best in cooperative relationships with other factions.

their queen and their main resource is the bodies of their enemies, so they're very incentivised to go out and fight as a warmongering faction. But I think the most unusual one, and the one I'm really liking right now, are the Aspects. They're diplomats, and we've had diplomatic factions in our games before, so they tend to do well more by negotiation than by brute force, and they have a couple of powers that allow them to do that. One is that they can force a treaty on another player by paying a bunch of influence, so they build up a lot of influence and then if the Necrophage are attacking them, they can force the Necrophage to go to peace, which no other faction can. They can also freely assimilate minor factions."

This gets them new units and heroes depending on how much of the minor faction's population they have in their cities, and may also unlock extra bonuses and improvements. Unlike in *Endless Legend 1*, minor factions in this game aren't constantly at war with the player, and can be left alone or dealt with diplomatically. Until the monsoon, that is, when all the little guys become enraged.

Another faction out of the four currently announced – a fifth is coming, but still under wraps – is The Last Lords. These ghostly vampires are an evolution of the Broken Lords from the previous game, and are completely dependent on Dust, a resource used in *Endless Legend* and *Endless Space*. "A [Last Lords] player won't even see food on the map," says Paxton. "They don't use food at all. They are these ghostly, vampiric knights in these hollow suits of armour. You'll see their spirits floating within the armour and they don't eat, they don't need food. They are powered by Dust.

"So when you are playing as them, you definitely feel the effect of it. Your cities will not grow, you will not get new population in them, unless you pay Dust for that to happen. Their units do not heal unless you pay Dust. Which is great if you have a ton of Dust, you've set up your early economic game very strongly and you have lots of Dust coming in. Then suddenly it's, 'All right, let's plan a new city, let's buy five population for it.' Nobody else can do that. Everybody else has to wait for food to come in and for their cities to slowly grow. Everybody has to wait for their armies to heal over a couple of turns. So economic players love The Last Lords. If you play a good economic game you have lots of power at your fingertips to make things happen."

FIGHT ON THE BEACHES

There's also going to be plenty of combat in *Endless Legend 2*, along with some nods to other games in the series, existing as they do in a kind of *Endless* shared universe. "One of the things I'm particularly proud of is that you may come across unique characters who are travelling and exploring Saiadha as you move across the world," says Paxton. "Some of our factions have history either with *Endless Legend 1*, like The Last Lords, but also the Kin of Sheridan. They're from the United Empire, from the stars. Some of the factions that you can play as are native to Saiadha, but The Last Lords and the Kin of Sheridan come from the greater universe."

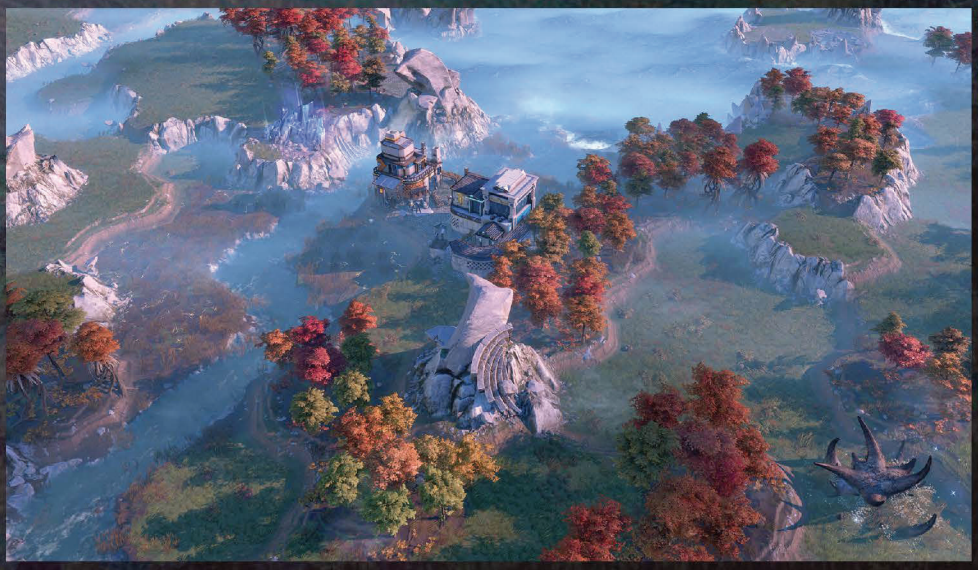
MINOR FACTIONS IN THIS GAME AREN'T CONSTANTLY AT WAR WITH THE PLAYER

Economics and combat are two of the traditional victory conditions of a 4X, but Amplitude is trying something new in *Endless Legend 2*.

"We have the typical [thing that] you can win when you get to the end turn," he says. "Whoever has the highest score by that time wins. Or if you defeat all of the other players, you win. But one thing that we're doing that's a little different here is there are also narrative victory conditions that come up through the story. So as you play the game, you will meet characters. You will find out more about the world. And the player has the option to decide how he wants to deal with what is happening. Depending on what he chooses, that opens up victory conditions for [the game] to say, 'All right, you've chosen to do this. Here is how you can win the game if you do these things.'

"So, narratively, it doesn't just open up a path. It's not like *Endless Legend 1* where, if you're playing as this faction, you can win through their faction quest, although every faction does have their own faction quest and a story that's being told. Every time you play, you get to choose, 'I may be playing the Kin, but this time I'm gonna choose this path, this option. This is the narrative victory condition that I'm going to pursue in order to try to win.' That's something I haven't seen done, and I'm excited to get players in as part of the Early Access as well.

The wait for *Endless Legend 2* does indeed seem to be endless, with a delay for extra polishing announced while this feature was being prepared. Amplitude has a track record of pulling this kind of thing off, however, and so as the waters pull back and reveal the studio's latest work, we could be in for a monsoon of 4X strategy. ■



BELOW: Minor factions live in isolated villages.

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Utterly broken or offensively bad; no value.
Example *Big Brother, Mad Dog McCree*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
Example *Skull Island: Rise of Kong, ShellShock: Nam '67*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
Examples *Underworld Ascendant, Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort.
Examples *Sonic: Lost World, Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare III, Redfall, Lego Horizon Adventures*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed especially well.
Examples *Minecraft Legends, Senua's Saga: Hellblade II*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
Examples *New World, Skull and Bones, Forspoken*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
Examples *Deep Rock Galactic, Star Wars Outlaws*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments. We love it.
Examples *Age of Wonders 4, Helldivers II*

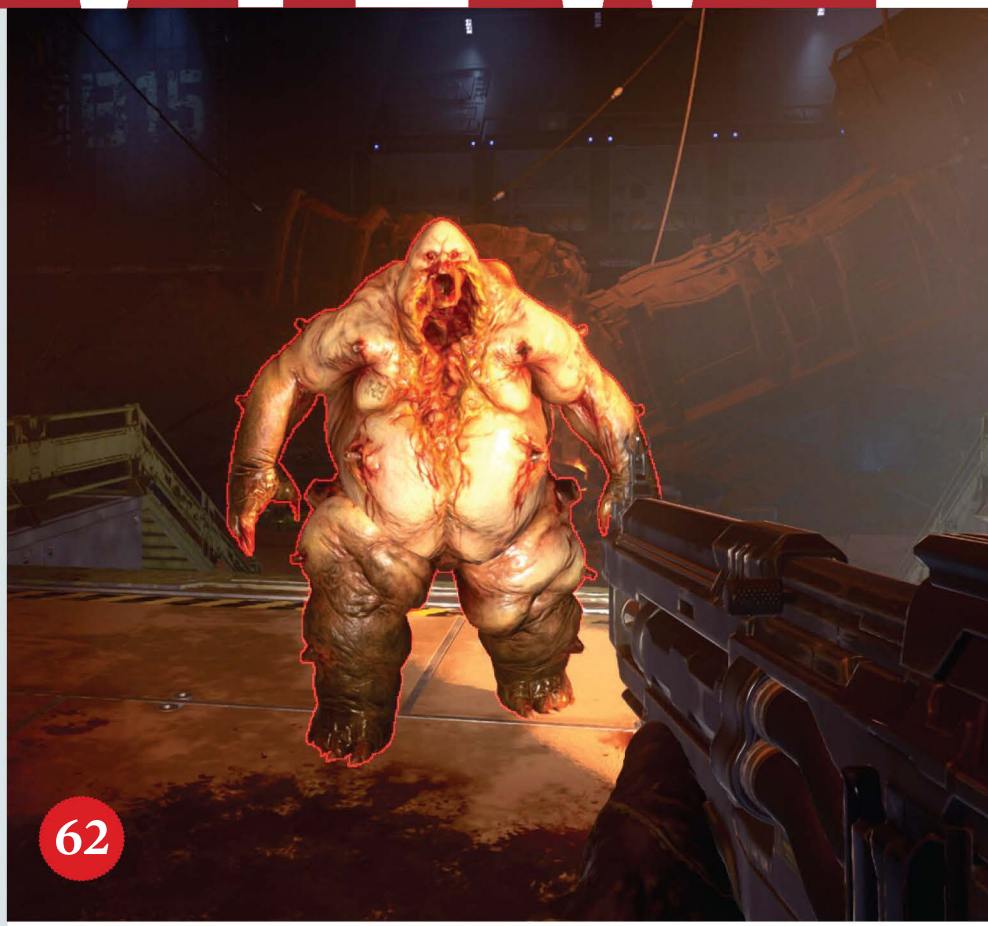
90%-94% Important to PC gaming and ahead of its time.
Examples *Elden Ring, Factorio, Balatro*

95%-98% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Baldur's Gate 3, Minecraft, Metaphor: ReFantazio*

99%-100% Advances the human species. Provides a transcendent feeling not dissimilar to the ending of Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey.

PC PowerPlay EDITOR'S CHOICE

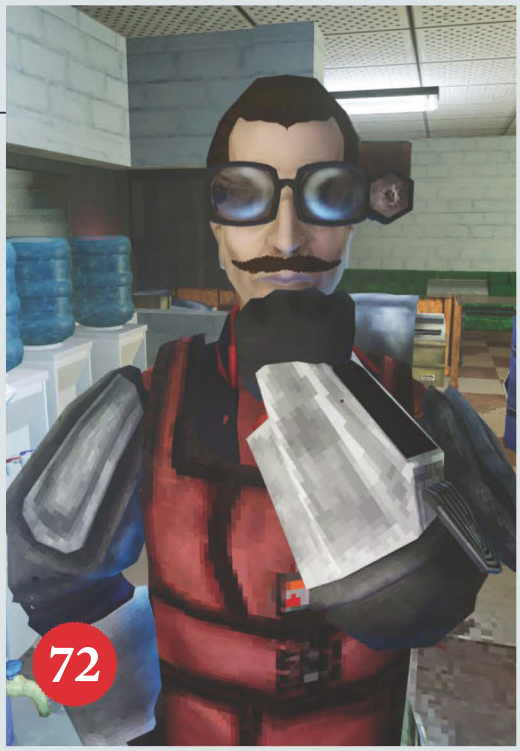
The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC PowerPlay staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.



Point 'n' click

What a joy it is to see the now ancient point-and-click genre of games getting interesting new releases on PC like *The Drifter*. As our review details this issue, this is a unique pulp adventure thriller which, while not quite successfully landing everything it ambitiously attempts to do, delivers an exquisite moody atmosphere as well as stunning pixel art and a set of refined mechanical systems. It's worth playing in our opinion, for the right price.

We experience another blast from the past this issue, too, in the return of *Killing Floor*. The third incarnation of this blood-drenched FPS is as violent and fun as ever, but whether or not it still has the legs to go the distance in a sea of similar rival shooters remains to be seen. Again, if the price is right, it looks like it packs bang for your buck.



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This month's homeless reviewers...

SHAUN PRESCOTT
Specialist in
Trashcan fires
Currently playing
The Drifter
This month
Ate liver and onions while wishing for a solid gold house and rocket car. Hey, it'll happen!

JOSHUA WOLENS
Specialist in
Scandi stealth
Currently playing
Eriksholm: The Stolen Dream
This month
Snuck into a series of saunas in Stockholm and disrobed. Steamy!

TYLER COLP
Specialist in
Wire-fu
Currently playing
Wuchang: Fallen Feathers
This month
Discovered a plume of feathers growing out of his butt. Don't ask.

MOLLIE TAYLOR
Specialist in
Gacha shenanigans
Currently playing
Persona 5: The Phantom X
This month
Scrooge McDuck dived into an all you can eat buffet of anime hotties.

MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Tactical voodoo
Currently playing
Desperados III
This month
Made dolls of major game publisher CEOs and stabbed them in the crotch. God's work.

AIM FOR THE ZED

KILLING FLOOR 3 is classic monster-shooting fun

By Elie Gould

I am but a simple creature, my idea of a good gaming time with friends is yapping about how our days have been while blowing monsters to smithereens, it's a good way to take the frustration out. So in that respect, *Killing Floor 3* does a great job. It places you and some friends into the heart of a horde of zeds with various weapons and says, "Have at it".

Killing Floor 3 is exactly what you would expect. It's you and a bunch of guns against hordes of bioengineered monsters. The matches are made up of five waves, with a boss fight at the end. Regardless of whether it's just you playing solo or with a team in multiplayer, things can get quite hairy in the later stages.

Luckily, you can stock up on ammo and meds after each wave, upgrading your weapons with different mods that you've crafted between matches. It can take some time to find and craft the weapon that works best for you. I tried to prioritise handling and reload speed as these are two stats that I found the most lacking with the base weapons provided.

But otherwise, *Killing Floor 3* is a very easy game to pick up, like most shooters, any practice you have at hitting heads will translate well here. Although learning how to crowd control the swarms of zeds is an important skill.

It also feels as cool as it sounds to blast zeds to bits. Tripwire has used a new gore system, which it's calling MEAT, that lets you dismember zeds in various ways. The graphics complement this as you can see every single chunk of brain and skull flying out of a dead zed's head. At one point, my team tore the legs off of the last enemy to slow it down, just so we could all complete our objectives before the next wave began.

You can see every single chunk of brain flying out of a dead zed's head

Unfortunately, even the coolest action sequences can get a little old. Waves may contain different grunts every time, but they can still become very predictable, easy to handle and therefore boring.

There are some optional story missions, which you can play by yourself or in a team, that can add a little more variety to matches, but there's only about four hours' worth of content there – you can blast through it pretty quickly. The missions see you work through various tasks – usually involving searching through corpses – and finish the run on a survival mode, lasting up to five waves of zeds. These aren't particularly memorable – the gist of it is that Nightfall Operations saves the world from a bioengineered disaster one corpse rummage at a time.

But progression in *Killing Floor 3* isn't centred around a story that you need to complete – instead, it's largely achieved through levelling up each strategist.

WHO'S WHO

There are six strategists to choose from, each offering a different major skill, like Medic, Sharpshooter and the under-appreciated Firebug, who is just someone running around with some flamethrowers.

I've been maining Commando because I just can't get enough of Foster's lush English accent. His autofire drone gadget, Hellion, which can take down a bunch of zeds and a Fleshpound, is a big help when you're outnumbered. The Sharpshooter, known as Luna, has also been great fun. I underestimated her at first – it's so often the case that in games, long-ranged fighters suffer in close-ranged scraps, but she can hold her own just as well as any when up against a swarm of zeds.

Firebug, Engineer and Medic are also solid choices for multiplayer combat, even if their firepower can't match Foster and Luna. The most interesting and quirky character, though, has to be the Ninja class, Nakata. Slicing monsters up with an electric-blue katana and hitting headshots with kunais is just too cool to pass up on.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A co-op or solo action-horror FPS which sees you take down hordes of monsters

EXPECT TO PAY
$58.50

DEVELOPER
Tripwire Interactive

PUBLISHER
Tripwire Interactive

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 5600G, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
steampowered.com/app/1430190/Killing_Floor_3/

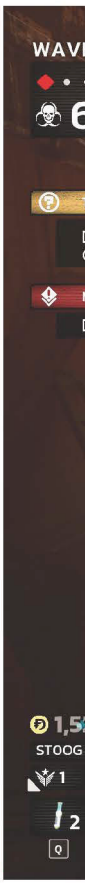
DRAMA QUEEN

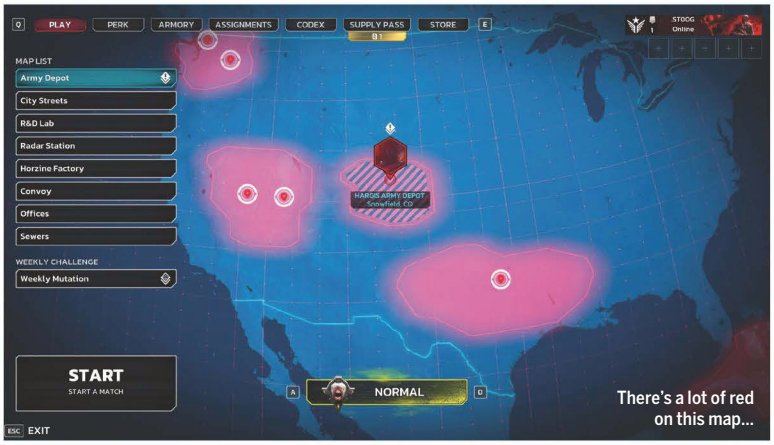
What makes the Queen Crawler so annoying?

1 Barging me into a corner so her hatchlings could gnaw on my ankles, hindering my ability to escape.

2 Leaping up into the sky faster than my mouse sensitivity could bear.

3 Teleporting away into some gloop as soon as I get close to killing it or manage to pin it down even for a second.





ABOVE: Everyone split up and look for clues.

UPPER LEFT: He's just standing there, menacingly!

LEFT: Just follow the blood trail.

IMPALER
SUBJECT: ABR-400
Known for its relentless brute strength, this sturdily-built zed leaves a trail of devastation with its head blade and missile barrages.

UPPER RIGHT: I think I'm in danger.

BELOW: A slow motion bloodbath.

When levelling up the strategists, you get to pick a new passive perk out of one to three options every two levels. One might offer a max ammo increase, while another lets you destroy enemy weak parts for gadget activation energy, making it faster to access Commando's Hellion.

There are passives up until level 30 right now, so maxing out a character's skill will take some time, approximately 25 hours, and then you have to do it for five other strategists. But as you unlock and upgrade more perks, your proficiency increases, which will give you further bonuses like increased fire rate or reload speed.

Running in circles does nothing to quell the rage of the Queen Crawler

THE LONG HAUL

Even when you've managed to do that, there's still the difficulty levels to master. Normal is pretty much a walk in the park if you're playing in a team, prime head-empty yap session with friends, but it can get a little dicey in the later waves if you're solo.

Then there's hard and Hell on Earth. While there'll certainly be *Killing Floor* veterans who are able to jump in at Hell on Earth straight away, and somehow last through all the waves and the boss fight, that certainly isn't me.

After beating a round on hard, I got way too overconfident and decided to give the hardest difficulty a shot. Everything was going well for about two seconds, and then a wave of zeds hit me, accompanied by a busload of Husks that turned me into BBQ, gangs of Bloats that covered me in irradiated gunk, and Scrakes, which would hook me back in every time I managed to make some distance from the horde.

It didn't go very well, and it was pretty gruelling. But that's a good thing. I want a high skill ceiling for *Killing Floor 3*, it gives me more of an incentive to play and practice with the goal of beating a level on Hell on Earth in mind.

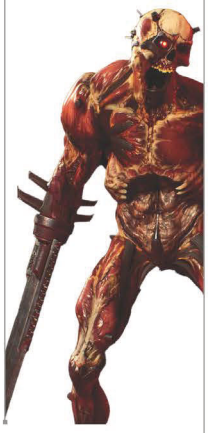
It's all about just finding what works, both by yourself and in a team. One of my favourite tricks, which has quickly become my go-to way for dealing with one of the bosses, the Impaler, is to kite it around a tight circle. I sometimes use a tank, but as long as it can't charge you down from a distance, you'll save yourself from getting hit by what is essentially a speeding truck. The Impaler also has missiles which it can launch from its arms, but if you're constantly standing behind something, it won't fire them at you – checkmate, loser.

But running around in circles does nothing to quell the rage of the Queen Crawler. This mire-infused boss is like a big and angry ant that'll charge headfirst into you and shove you into a corner or off a ledge. She also deploys a ton of little hatchlings, which become the most annoying thing on earth as they gnaw on your ankles.

Instead of trying to create any space between yourself and the Queen Crawler, it's just best to pummel her with as much damage as you possibly can. Trust me, she can close any gap you manage to make in seconds, so the only port of call is a battle of attrition, trying to kill her before she ends you.

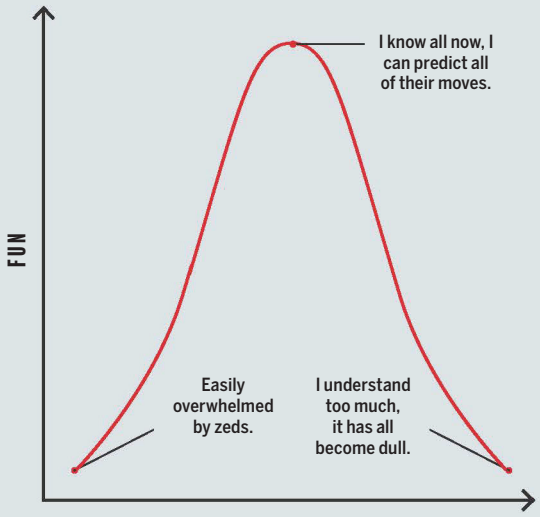
THIN ICE

The skill ceiling may be high, but there is an issue in the interim, after the first ten hours or so, progression slows down slightly, and this is where games can get repetitive and boring.



ROLLERCOASTER

The Killing Floor 3 ride



Like any multiplayer game, playing with friends can help this massively, but without that, *Killing Floor 3* does fall into a bit of a lull.

It's also not the most creative shoot 'em up game around, and it doesn't do a whole lot to separate itself from the multiplayer FPS crowd. It's not something that grabs me and makes me want to play it every spare second I have, but in moderation, I still enjoy what time I do spend with it.

It's a great way to pass the time with friends who also enjoy executing monsters as much as you do, and if you're ever at a loss for what to do, you can always test yourself with a new strategist or a harder difficulty setting.

LOOKING AHEAD

But it also seems like part of the empty space in *Killing Floor 3* has been left on purpose. Tripwire has already announced its post-launch plans for the game. There's going to be a rearmament update with new weapons and mods, and a Season 2 that adds a new map, new zed, and a specialist called DJ Scully. Then, 2026 will see two more seasons with more maps, bosses and an assignment campaign.

Killing Floor 3 isn't inventive now, but hopefully, as Tripwire adds more content in the future, it will begin to experiment more with the premise and shake things up a bit. I'd love to see something like a colosseum mode where you just get plonked into an arena with some friends to face all of the bosses at once. But maybe I'm just a bit twisted.

If you're on the fence, it may be worth waiting a while until more content is added further down the line and when there's maybe even a sale on. I don't think I could convince my friends to spend $58 right now on a game they aren't sure they'll play a great deal.

But if you're a fan of *Killing Floor* and everything the previous games had to offer, then you should check *Killing Floor 3* out – even if it's just to enjoy the same chaotic fights with better graphics. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Killing Floor 3 **is fun, quick to pick up and while there'll always be a place for gory shooters, they are a dime a dozen.**

74

PRETTY SNEAKY SIS

ERIKSHOLM: THE STOLEN DREAM's Scandinavian stealth is too strict for its own good

By Joshua Wolens

Eriksholm: The Stolen Dream will dupe you. An isometric stealth game that puts you in control of multiple characters who each have their own abilities? You know what this is, surely? You'll think to yourself, "This is a _Commandos_, this is a _Desperados_, this is a game about combining and applying your characters' skillsets to creatively overcome obstacles." And you'll be wrong. Despite appearances, _Eriksholm_ is a strict, tight, and mostly linear thing.

There's more in common with *Hitman Go* than *Shadow Tactics* here: the job before you is not figuring out your own solution to its artisanal, bijou stealth encounters – it's poking at them until you figure out the precise solutions the devs intended, and getting spotted is an instant failure. Trying to cheese any of them invariably means a swift end and a return to an admittedly generous checkpoint.

So it's more stealth puzzle than stealth sandbox, but within those confines it's satisfying to figure out what each encounter wants from you, even if it doesn't feel especially creative. And gosh, what a looker. Never before have Scandinavian cops been so lustrously lit, their twitches and grimaces so minutely animated.

19TH-CENTURY 999

For its first few chapters, *Eriksholm* has you play exclusively as Hanna, an orphan girl who has recovered from Heartpox, the plague that's ravaging the game's pseudo-Sweden.

Hanna's convalescence was overseen by her brother Herman, and the two get all of five minutes together before they get separated and the neighbourhood finds itself infested with cops. Herman's been up to something while Hanna's been in her sickbed and the gendarmes aren't happy about it, and now it's on her to figure out what and reunite with him.

These earliest chapters are the strongest. All Hanna can do is sneak, hide in shadows and use a blowpipe to knock foes out. Her superpower, really, is her organic ties to and knowledge of her community. She knows the shortcuts and secret passages, and her neighbours look the other way as she scurries over their rooftops.

The cops are an unwelcome presence, infuriating the locals

Meanwhile, the cops are an alien and unwelcome presence, infuriating the locals while Hanna breezes easily over, under and past them. It's a great local story – told as much through gameplay as it is through the dialogue you overhear from the town's alcove – of a kind of natural community solidarity.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Isometric stealth, Swedish-style

EXPECT TO PAY
$55

DEVELOPER
River End Games

PUBLISHER
Nordcurrent Labs

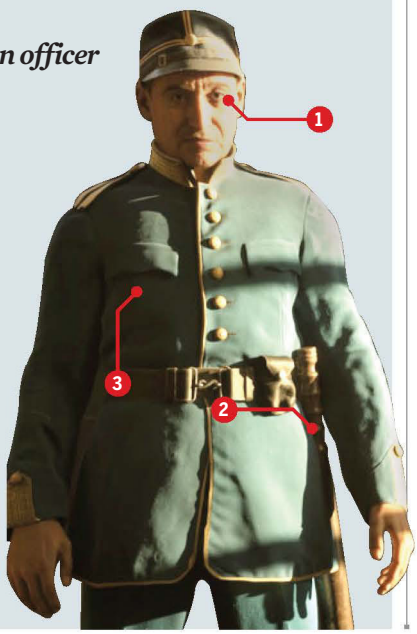
REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 3700x, 32 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
eriksholmgame.com

OI! OI!

Anatomy of an officer



1 BEADY EYES
Completely foiled by shadow, waist-high boxes, or distances above about 20 feet.

2 TRUNCHEON
They never actually use these (the game just ends if you get seen), but it probably makes them feel nice and safe.

3 DRESS BLUES
A visual marker to separate them from your neighbours, even from a sky-high isometric viewpoint.

The game doles out new gameplay elements smartly as it goes on, and even as the story lost me I found my interest at least piqued by the new talents I was getting. Adding Alva to your crew lets you smash light sources and clamber up drainpipes, while the late addition of Sebastian finally gives you the ability to just choke out guards from behind. Almost every new chapter adds some new gameplay wrinkle, challenging you to integrate a new skill into your toolbox to overcome the ever-more complex stealth puzzle boxes.

But when it comes time to put those skills to use? Every encounter feels fine-tuned to fail any attempt at outside-the-box thinking. Tightly honed patrol patterns mean you can't quite get bodies into cover before being spotted by a guard who spins around at the last nanosecond before you're safe. Alva can distract guards with her slingshot, sure, but she can't make them move using it unless the level is explicitly designed to allow it.

They're not badly designed encounters. I felt smart when I cracked them and had fun in the process of doing so, but the trial-and-error means you run into an issue time and again where things feel like they ought to work, but don't, and that they would work in a game that kept a looser grip on the player.

It's an almost *Call of Duty*-ish approach to stealth game design that doesn't 100% work. But by its nature, stealth precludes the kind of bombast that might keep you engaged through a *CoD* shooting gallery.

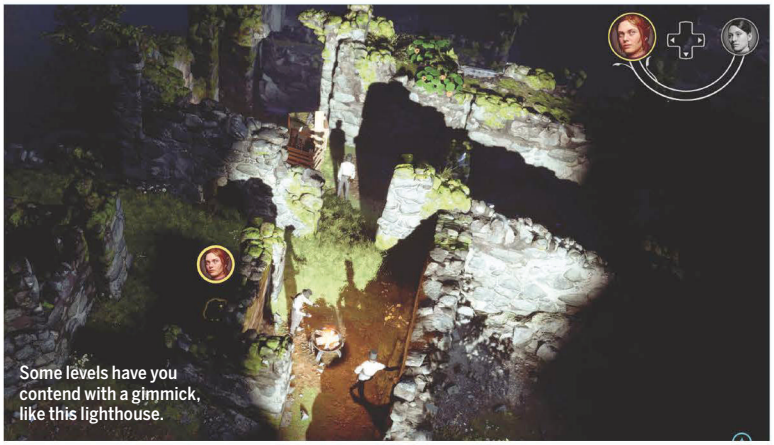
There's lots to like in *Eriksholm* even if most of it never tips over into excellence. You can feel the bones of a special *Eriksholm* 2 in there, just beneath that sun-starved skin. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Beautiful, but *Eriksholm*'s stealth feels too constrictive to reach greatness.

77

Eriksholm's performances are really top-notch.

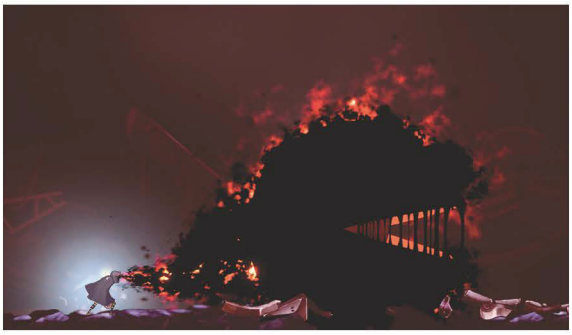


Some levels have you contend with a gimmick, like this lighthouse.

FAR LEFT: Thank god someone left all these conveniently placed boxes lying around.

The city feels big, ramshackle, and lived-in.

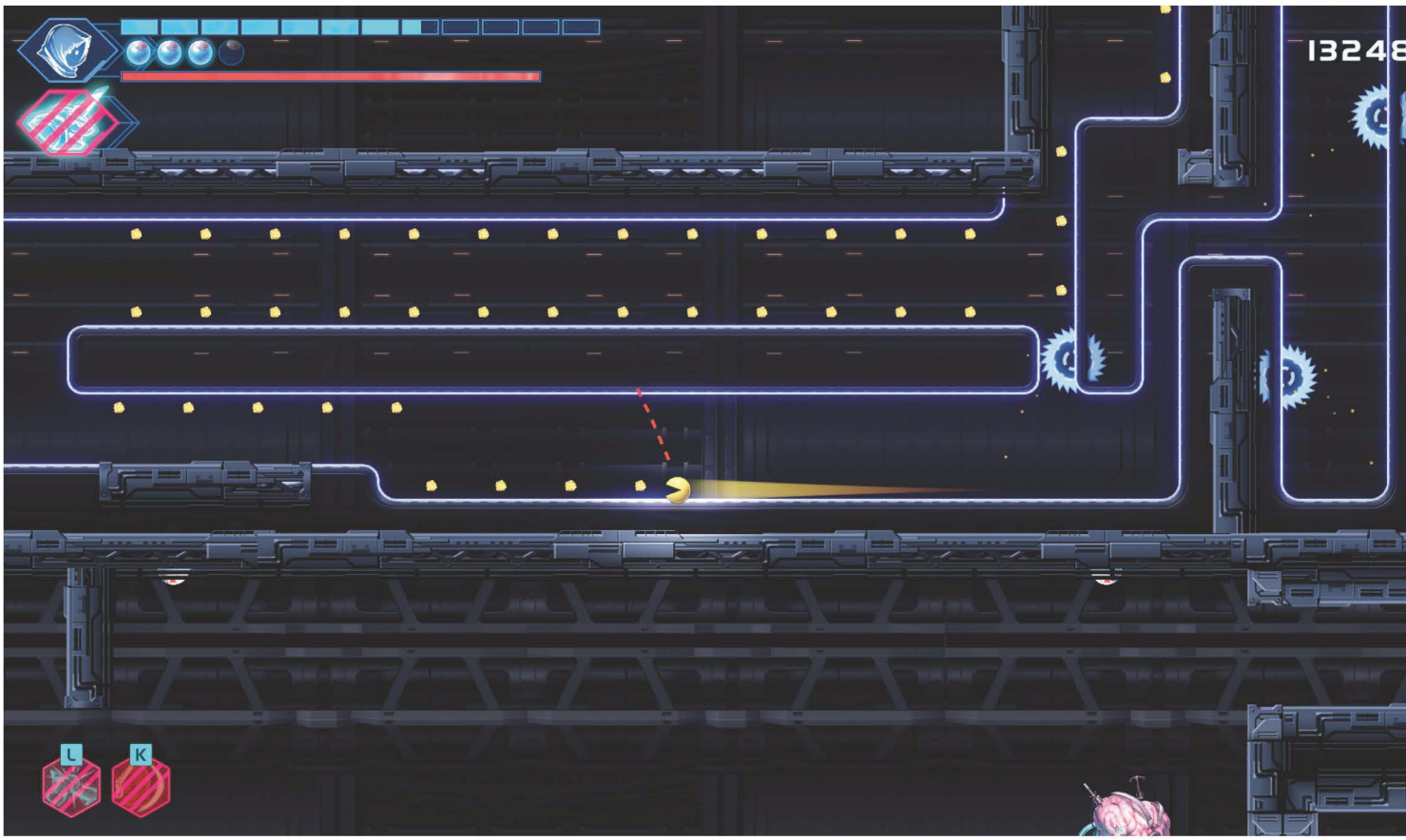
Guys, I'm starting to think this isn't our daddy's Pac-Man...



RIGHT: Pac-Man's ghosts now pilot possessed mechs. Progress?

FAR RIGHT: This bit looks great! If only it were playable...

BELOW: Some classic *Pac-Man* munching to remind you that you're not just playing this month's millionth Metroidvania.



WHACK-A WAKKA WAKKA

Pac-Man gets entertainingly miscast in grimdark Metroidvania SHADOW LABYRINTH

By Abbie Stone

Not since Bob Hoskins' Mario shoved his face down a woman's top have I witnessed such a bizarrely adult reimagining of a family-friendly character. While *Shadow Labyrinth* never goes that far this is still a game in which Pac-Man helps you slaughter monsters with brains on the wrong sides of their skulls. Then he helpfully swallows their spines afterwards so you can spend them at the shop.

Well, technically it isn't Pac-Man. Here your companion is called Puck, a cute nod to what was almost Pac-Man's name/a helpful distancing of this monster from being considered the real deal. Because Puck is a manipulative, untrustworthy devil on your shoulder who's unlikely to be fronting any Saturday morning cartoons anytime soon. You actually play as someone Puck summoned from another dimension to help with their shady quest, and Puck keeps referring to you as Number Eight. Brrr.

From the moment you pick up a sword it becomes clear that this is going to be a slightly more routine adventure than the oddball premise suggests. Combat's a traditional hacky slashy affair, although Puck does enjoy swallowing the corpses afterwards. Chow down on enough fallen foes and you'll be able to turn into a giant invincible mech with a Pac-Man centre. Goofy fun, though I'd have liked to have seen munching woven into the combat more.

After an overly linear opening few hours, the planet finally opens up, revealing a solid Metroidvania core. It's full of great navigation puzzles, platforming challenges, and poring over the map for secrets. And it's huge too. There's easily 40 hours of game here, even if a lot of that is because the difficulty curve suddenly decides to take inspiration from Pac-Man's horrible spiky mouth during the brutal climax.

So *Shadow Labyrinth* is an easy game to enjoy moment to moment, albeit with the niggling sense that you've played a lot of this before. *Hollow Knight*'s air-dash makes its obligatory appearance, along with the usual double jump and hookshot. All solidly implemented but there's long stretches where you could be playing basically any Metroidvania from the last few years.

Puck is a manipulative, untrustworthy devil on your shoulder

The game gets more interesting when it leans into the *Pac-Man* of it all. Find and activate blue rails and suddenly you switch to playing as Puck, munching his way along them. A novel way to explore, and later sections that have you switching between the two playstyles make for some great platforming.

MAZED AND CONFUSED

Then there are the maze levels. They're essentially inspired remixes of the original game, with smart new ideas like platforms that can be weaponised when you slam into them, and weapons like a decoy Pac-Man that the fine people of 1980 would have killed for. The strict five-minute timer is a blessing and a curse here, as it's not always obvious what you're supposed to be doing. But the briefness of these stages usually makes the pull of one more go when you mess up hard to resist.

These sections also have terrific energy. The dance music thumps merrily, with the colourful visuals and sound effects practically cheering you on as you gobble up ghosts. And then you return to *Shadow Labyrinth* proper, with its mournful, forgettable tunes (wait... was there music?) and uninspired art style. It's hard not to feel a little deflated that more of the all-singing all-dancing tone of the mazes couldn't have seeped into the tone of the main adventure.

An overly-talky technobabble festival, rife with clichés and dull stock characters. Even the Steam achievements have text like "in war, the size of the hand wielding the sword matters not".

It's tough getting dramatic range out of a character who's a melon with a slice missing, and there's nothing in here as moving as Pac-Man meeting his one true love in the first cutscene. The fact that *Shadow Labyrinth* hopelessly tries just reminds you what a silly idea a sombre reimagining was in the first place. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A Pac-Man Metroidvania, for some reason

EXPECT TO PAY
$39.95

DEVELOPER
Bandai Namco

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco

REVIEWED ON
Asus ROG Ally

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bandainamcoent.com/games/shadow-labyrinth

PAC-PICKS

Four other Pac-Man spin-offs

PAC-PIX
Ingenious DS game in which you have to draw Pac-Man into existence with the touchscreen and stylus.

PAC-MAN CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION
Update of the 1980 original that's a clear influence on *Labyrinth*.

PAC-N-ROLL
Roll Pac-Man around mazes and try not to think about his poor mouth each rotation.

PAC-MAN ARRANGEMENT
Another great remake of the original, hidden behind the world's most boring name.

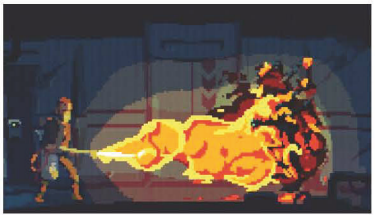
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

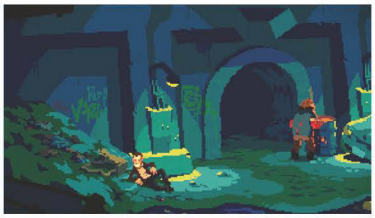
Shadow Labyrinth from Bandai Namco is a good Metroidvania trapped in the shadow of too many better ones.

73

Naturally, the city's major newspaper is based in the dodgiest part of town.

RIGHT: Like in all good thrillers, there is inevitably a flamethrower involved.





All characters are fully-voiced, usually in rich Australian accents.

The rich, flickering shadows of this barrel fire are a joy to behold in movement.

PACIFIC DRIFT

THE DRIFTER is a gorgeous point-and-click with a noir-ish edge

By Shaun Prescott

We meet Mick Carter as a homeless drifter. Due to some unspecified past trauma, he's abandoned his settled domestic life in a nameless Australian city for a self-flagellating transient existence. He's en route to home, where he's been beckoned to attend his mother's funeral. He does so reluctantly, because it draws him closer to a past he's deliberately abandoned.

Shit hits the fan almost immediately. Not only is Mick forcibly ejected from his train carriage by a mysterious, possibly supernatural presence, but he's then framed for the murder of a homeless man in the seedy railway underpass he finds himself in. At first, *The Drifter* promises to be a dark character study wrapped in a mystery, but it proves to be more – to its detriment.

The Drifter bills itself as a "pulp adventure thriller" and it wastes no time living up to that descriptor. Carter is a depressive but nevertheless oddly calm protagonist, with a familiar Australian matter-of-factness about him. He's downcast, but not entirely ruined. In fact, when a hi-tech conspiracy begins to loom he proves quite resourceful: *The Drifter*'s point-and-click trappings generally demand MacGyver-like logic, which is to say, an ability to use mundane objects to solve seemingly insurmountable problems.

But *The Drifter* has quieter, ostensibly more complex ambitions. At first the world presents as a richly down-at-heel urban sprawl. Its lavishly illustrated environs are a potent combination of John Carpenter blight with film noir tactics. Powerhoof's pixel art strives towards a painterly, oddly curvaceous semi-realism, darkness and undulating shadows rendering a bleak and forbidding world that still manages to be tastefully colourful and varied. The studio has a distinctive approach to pixel art, which is no small feat.

The point-and-click elements are familiar. Puzzles tend to boil down to executing actions in the right order, combining found objects to make a jury-rigged tool, or compelling certain events to occur to accommodate my objectives. Powerhoof has devised a clever user interface that takes a lot of the tedious guesswork out while also providing information about present circumstances, lest one lose their way.

Puzzles tend to boil down to executing actions in the right order

The Drifter is a finely wrought pointand-click adventure, with gorgeous art – and the latter cannot be over-emphasised – but its pulp tendencies sit a bit askew from some of its more severe themes. The source of Carter's jiltedness rubs awkwardly against the high concept sci-fi narrative, which of course involves time travel, albeit towards bleaker ends than the usual "just one more chance" fantasy.

It's a refreshingly ruthless, refreshingly human, framing of regret, but as *The Drifter* moves into labyrinthine sci-fi territory, and as its strands coil around a conspiracy much larger than Carter's circumstances, the game loses sight of the emotional stakes in favour of the procedural unfolding of wily mad scientist baloney. As the story progressed, I felt more and more remote from Mick Carter.

To Powerhoof's credit, this partial failure has a lot to do with the limitations of genre conventions; within the strictures of a loosely side-scrolling and panned out presentation, the subtleties other mediums could use to squeeze feeling out of Carter aren't available. Once we've left the forbidding, narrowed-in cityscapes in favour of more outlandish 'pulpish' environs there are fewer opportunities to feel as if we're commandeering a genuinely shaken character; Carter turns into a fish-out-of-water problem solving avatar with depressive posture.

Can a point-and-click adventure be good if its story doesn't stick the landing? Powerhoof's sublime art direction give it potential to tell stories like this without resorting to cliché, and the studio's approach to UI and puzzle design is impeccable. *The Drifter* is a great piece of design, but it needed to avoid the shelter of pulp to be a captivating adventure. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A point-and-click pulp adventure thriller with true grit

EXPECT TO PAY
$29.50

DEVELOPER
Powerhoof, Dave Lloyd

PUBLISHER
Powerhoof

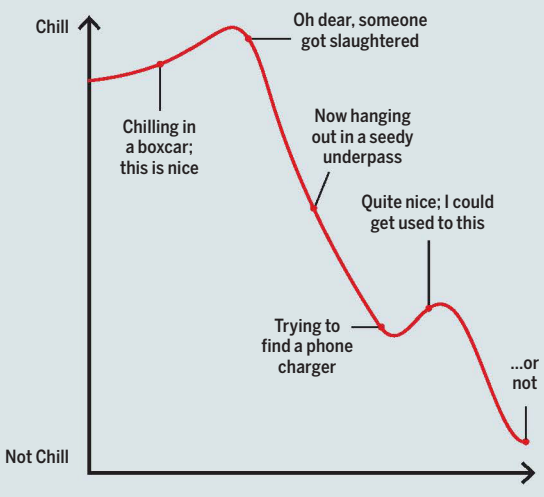
REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 5600H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
thedriftergame.com

UNCHILL-OMETER

Mick Carter is always either screaming or relaxed


Chill
Not Chill
Chilling in a boxcar; this is nice
Oh dear, someone got slaughtered
Now hanging out in a seedy underpass
Quite nice; I could get used to this
Trying to find a phone charger
...or not

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A gorgeous and moody adventure with impeccable art, but its pulp leanings undermine its best qualities.

70

FULL-LIFE

ABIOTIC FACTOR is an instant survival classic and one of the best I've played in years

By Morgan Park

I'll just get it out in the open: *Abiotic Factor* is one of the greatest survival crafting games ever made and by far my favourite. In a year of early access time with friends, we've witnessed the GATE Cascade Research Facility and its horrors expand in real time. Updates have proven frequent and excellent, unlocking huge sectors of the map while introducing transformative technology, mysteries, conveniences and, most importantly, fishing.

I'm not usually one to play games before they hit 1.0, but *Abiotic Factor*'s premise was too good to pass up. You play as scientists trapped in a secret underground facility amidst a Black Mesa-style disaster in the year 1997. That's some potent PC gaming catnip, but the *Half-Life* trappings aren't just wallpaper.

Deep Field Games takes the survival framework of *Valheim* and *Project Zomboid* and fully commits to the idea of nerds with zero survival skills and male pattern baldness thwarting an interdimensional apocalyptic invasion with nothing but office equipment, PhDs and gallons of coffee.

Nerds with male pattern baldness thwarting an invasion

WORK LIFE BALANCE

Many of our 80+ hours in *Abiotic Factor* were spent tiptoeing down the cold, unfeeling halls of GATE while gripping crossbows made out of metre rulers and eating crisps pilfered from vending machines. *Abiotic Factor*'s story and the thrust of its central quest, is about escape. We've raided nuclear reactors, charted other dimensions, fired lasers at 30-foot monsters and robbed a train in the name of fixing a busted elevator, but at least half of that time was also spent building a home base.

It's become my favourite place in all of videogames. The heart is the same little craphole we built on our very first day using just a workbench and some storage boxes in the cafeteria security office. Its slow but steady expansion is a reflection of *Abiotic Factor*'s fantastically long tech tree constantly feeding us weird things to build.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Co-op survival and crafting with scientists

EXPECT TO PAY
$50.95

DEVELOPER
Deep Field Games

PUBLISHER
Playstack

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9 9900KS, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Super

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
abioticfactor.com

We outgrew the security office and started building in the kitchen, where my friend spent afternoons preparing cursed alien burgers, soups, salad wraps and sushi to keep our bellies filled. The discovery of farmable crops from the Anteverse spilled operations into the outer cafeteria entryway. Before we knew it, our barricaded fortress of increasingly dangerous inventions – laser turrets, void toilets, an alien we trapped in a tube – doubled as a cosy museum of our adventures.

The brilliant twist of *Abiotic Factor*'s handcrafted corporate environments is that there are no blank canvases to work with. You're forced to carve comfort out of bland spaces with pre-existing dimensions and purposes, which takes the pressure off players like me who typically make a boring square in *Minecraft* and call it a day. You're not building a home as much as moving into an existing one, a distinction that proved fulfilling. In one satellite base, we spent a whole night converting a featureless lab into a gourmet kitchen/firing range with cutting boards, ammo depots and fridges.

It helps that *Abiotic Factor*'s map is overflowing with furniture, photos, knick-knacks and decorations that we'd find on expeditions and instinctively pocket. Were it not for our tastefully curated living room decor, shelf of collectible GATE figures and literal dozens of dog photos, our base would feel like any old workshop.

DRY MOUTH

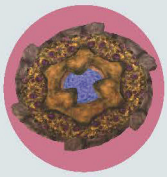
Comfortable spaces aren't just a cosmetic flourish, because *Abiotic Factor* has so many systems, simulations and skills that go beyond your standard survival hunger meter. It's the only survival game I've played that rewards not just surviving, but thriving. Sleeping and pooping are hands-on activities with timing minigames. Standing by a heater helps you heal. Drinking coffee grants

LUNCH BREAK

The culinary delicacies of Abiotic Factor

ANTEVERSE CHEESE
The sinful combination of alien milk sacs, anteverse juice and hydrochloric acid.

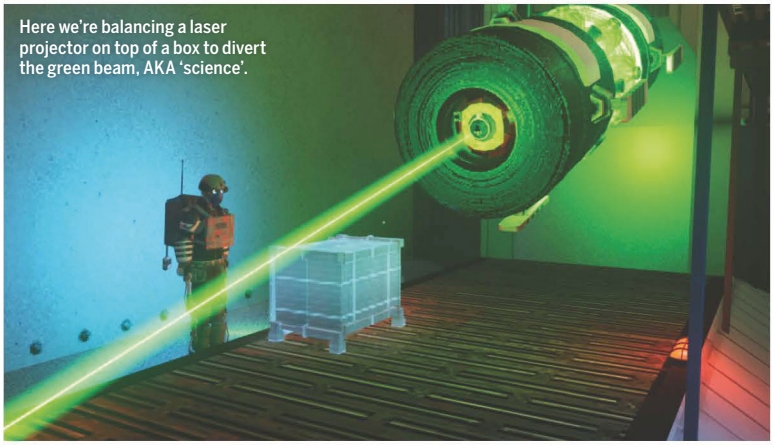
COSMOTO SALAD WRAP
Consider this healthy wrap made from space lettuce, Greyeb eyes and super tomatoes.



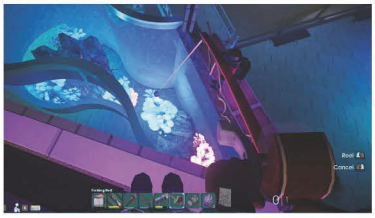
CARBUNCLE PIZZA
A pizza made by chopping up carbuncle guts and mixing them with some bread.

BAKED PESTATO
Turn lemons into lemonade by filleting those pesky pests and baking them inside a potato. Watch for spikes.

Wearing a chef hat makes you better at chopping up dead bodies.



Here we're balancing a laser projector on top of a box to divert the green beam, AKA 'science'.



LEFT: Since there are no lakes or oceans at GATE, you have to get creative with fishing spots.

GATE scientists must be prepared for all myco hazards.

RIGHT: *Abiotic Factor* has one of the deepest and strangest cooking systems of any survival game.

FAR RIGHT: It doesn't look it, but Greyeb eyes can cooked into a mean salad wrap.

Our home away from home.

cold resistance. Even sitting on a couch has the tangible effect of pausing fatigue buildup.

Linking normal human maintenance to the survival loop has this wonderful way of bringing the roleplay out of us. Normal conversations in *Abiotic Factor* include what's for dinner, how tired we are, or planning supply runs while sitting on a couch sipping sodas. It's the most lifelike survival game I've played, which is surprising given the constant presence of killer security bots, cultish militias and the Coworker, an NPC who walks on four legs.

I'm still surprised to discover new buffs and debuffs triggered by specific actions. Screw up too much during the sleeping minigame? Sorry, you're groggy (+30% fatigue). Recently eaten some good soup? Congrats, you're now Souper Satisfied (hunger depletes slowly for a while). That's all on top of a fun traits system that lets you sign up for both positive and negative bonuses at character creation. You can take more positive traits by also choosing more negative traits, which are still informing our playstyles in ways I never expected.

Buff Brainiac came in handy countless times when hauling 80 pounds of gear, but to afford it I also took Weak Bladder, a trait that earned me a reputation for constantly needing a bathroom in the middle of an expedition. If there was a toilet around, great, but if not, well... let's just say I earned the Accidents Happen achievement in record time.

Meanwhile, my friend chose Narcoleptic, a sleepy curse that plagued her for so long that she started adventuring while seated in a rolling chair to stave off exhaustion. Eventually she got around it by grinding Strength to carry around a military cot in her backpack.

EMPLOYEE REVIEW

Classes provide a template for how you could spec your scientist, but they're not prescriptive. You get better at whatever you're doing, be it sprinting, sneaking, shooting, or shaking vending machines.

I consider it a great sign that *Abiotic Factor* has so many weird and intriguing combat options that all five of us ended up with different specialities: electrified blades, modified crowbars, throwing darts, a deadly disc launcher with the guts of an air compressor. I committed to ranged, beginning with a makeshift crossbow fitted out of rulers and rubber bands. I couldn't keep my reticle steady for the longest time, but eventually I became the party's sniper.

Abiotic Factor has so many weird and intriguing combat options

Combat itself isn't stellar: clubs and crowbars have an unsatisfying 'bonk' that's a bit too close to classic *Half-Life*, enemies are really spongy early on, there's not a lot of damage feedback and hit detection can be choppy if your host doesn't have great internet. The pipe clubs and kitchen knives that carried us through the early game graduated to laser swords, goo launchers, electro-magnetic crossbows and like 18 other mad scientist gadgets I don't want to spoil.

Abiotic Factor does have normal guns, but they're deliberately limited. Ammo is hard to come by and most guns aren't even usable until you upgrade them.

HEAD SPACE

What goes on in the mind of a GATE scientist?

10%
SNOOZING
Big-brained individuals need their beauty sleep. Just don't have a nightmare...
25%
CRAFTING
Ooh, what's that shiny new spear I can craft now? An upgraded oven, you say? Don't mind if I do.
35%
EXPLORING
Fan out, kill every alien or soldier you see and don't jump into any portals without the whole party.
10%
POOPING
Where's the nearest can?
12%
HUNGRY
That goulash is calling my name. Oh, but so is that alien burger and anteverse sushi.
8%
RESOURCE MANAGEMENT
Oh god, we're out of refined carbon again. And who used all the rubber bands for crossbow bolts?

OFFSITE

Finding a new building is always the most exciting part of a night, as the group fans out like a pack of dogs and pick apart every inch of it for story bits, characters to talk to and any furniture not nailed down. I'll never forget the night we finally punched through the Manufacturing wing by triggering a giant explosion, or our harrowing scuba dive in the Hydroplant, or the day a single sniper in a hallway wiped out our whole party, or the time we stepped through a portal into the Anteverse and discovered *Abiotic Factor* goes to way more places than just GATE itself.

These regular excursions into the unknown are so unique for a survival game. Not only do they break up the barrage of hallways, but they also serve as a sandbox for playing with genre. An early portal world, Flathill, is a survival-horror episode about avoiding the gaze of a 20-foot-tall skeletal monster in a residential neighbourhood. Another is a no-holds-barred throwdown with GATE's militarised cleaners on a runaway train.

Abiotic Factor encourages repeat trips to portal worlds by packing them with unique resources that reset every in-game week – this is the closest it gets to 'farming' since resources never replenish in the main facility. It's a disorienting combo of a game, catching both survival diehards and those desperate for anything *Half-Life*-shaped in its dragnet, but its magical moments aren't on an alien planet or in a crafting bench. It's the gaps that are special – the quiet moments between adventures where GATE's dreary soundscape becomes a backdrop for friends discussing story theories, what soup's ready on the stove, or where to go next.

I recommend playing with your best buds, and slowly. There's an unbelievable amount of stuff to do and the finale chapter, new to 1.0, is excellent. With major changes to the power curve like the Enhancement Bench, it might even be worth starting over. I know I will in a few years, because *Abiotic Factor* is a classic in the making. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

***Abiotic Factor* is an unforgettable, interdimensional odyssey for you and your closest friends.**

92

BACK FOR SPORE

MYCOPUNK is a mess, in the best kind of way

By Elie Gould

M*ycopunk* is about as chaotic as a co-op shooter can get. You work for a megacorporation which mines the planet of New Atlas for Saxonite. But after a fungus infects the world, you're sent down alongside other members of the New Atlas Hazard Crew to clear the way and gather helpful resources. Oh – and you're directed by Roachard Cox, your line manager who also happens to be a talking cockroach. Try not to think about it too hard, you'll be fine.

Mycopunk is full of clutch plays, chaotic fights, and good old-fashioned kiteing of enemies. It's probably the most fun I've had in a shooter for a long time, primarily because it manages to straddle the line of being difficult but not punishing.

When selecting one of the various mission types, you can also customise the difficulty. There are three swarm intensities to choose from, which'll alter how likely enemies are to overrun you. Then there are six different difficulty levels to pick from, Difficulty 1 is the easiest, providing the least amount of resources, and Difficulty 6 is the hardest, giving players the most resources and XP.

Being able to change swarm intensities and difficulty separately from each other lets you experience all the different missions at your own pace, in circumstances that let you enjoy *Mycopunk* to the fullest. Like having to deal with mountains of enemies piling onto you, but don't want them to pack too much of a punch? Pick a high swarm intensity at a low level, and so on.

Outside of difficulty, smart design choices (like removing the need to hunt for ammo) also make a world of difference. Instead of worrying about where I could find the next ammo cache like in other games, all I need to do to get more bullets is damage enemies with my other weapon.

I'm a huge fan of there being no stamina system, too. The enemy bots are pretty fast, so having the ability to keep on running is vital. But it's not like you zip around whenever you feel like it. Instead, three of the four characters all have movement-based abilities on cooldown.

I'm a robot in a puffer jacket, being advised by a talking cockroach

Scrapper (my fav) has a jetpack and deploys a grapple pole, which the whole team can use to launch themselves in the air. Wrangler has an air dash and a rocket lasso that can propel you forward. Glider has a wingsuit that you can fly around with. Bruiser just deploys shields and can ground slam, which emits a shockwave to damage enemies, so I'm sure he appreciates the infinite stamina more than anyone else.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A co-op PvE shooter where you fight fungus

EXPECT TO PAY
$21.99

DEVELOPER
Pigeons at Play

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 5600G, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/3247750/Mycopunk/

KNOCK 'EM DEAD

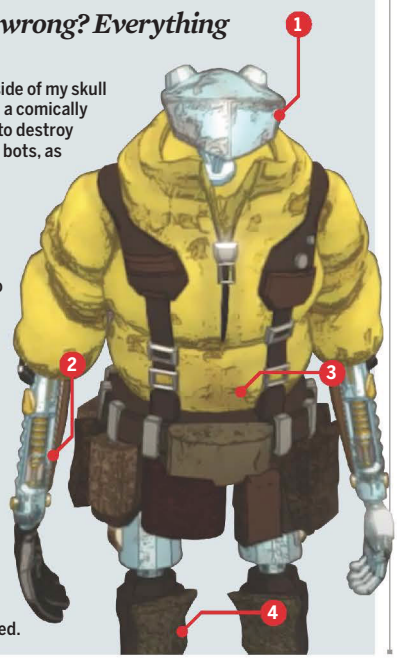
What could go wrong? Everything

1 HEADACHE
A giant hole in the side of my skull courtesy of a robot with a comically large claw – remember to destroy every part of the enemy bots, as others can nab them.

2 FRIED
My right arm is all crispy because I accidentally walked into a laser beam while running away from a horde of bots.

3 TORN
Spliced across the abdomen after taking too much damage. I'll have to wait for one of my teammates to glue me back together.

4 TRAPPED
I stood on an exploding mineral that some sneaky bot dropped.



RUN, SCRAPPER, RUN

These small tweaks remove stressors that some games tend to rely on – lesser games might hold sacred the myth that a shooter has to be gruelling or realistic. Meanwhile, in *Mycopunk*, I'm a robot in a puffer jacket, being advised by a talking cockroach – realism went out the window a long time ago.

But the fun doesn't stop when the mission does. The home base is huge, housing tons of games and what I can only assume are the developers' pets as screensavers all over the place, which is excellent. This is also when you upgrade your characters and kit. Instead of equipping upgrades after you unlock them, you need to squeeze them into a hive-shaped inventory.

Mycopunk shows a ton of promise, but that doesn't mean it's infallible. The progression can become a bit of a slog, and it can take a while to level up or collect enough resources to upgrade your kit. There's also definitely a cap as to how many missions you can do in a row before it all just blends into a violent blur. The variety in mission types only keeps things fresh for so long.

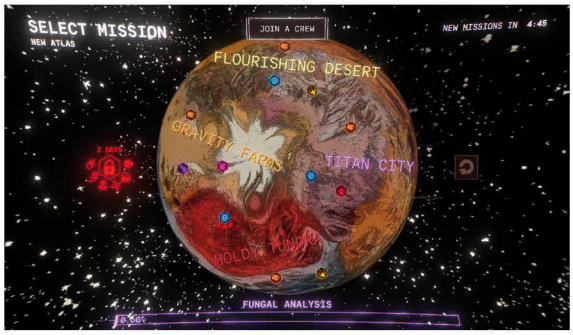
There are also some glitches, many of which the devs are aware of, but that doesn't make them any less annoying. I've been lasered by an Abomination through a wall more than once now – you're never safe, even when you think you are. But none of this ruins the fun, it's just something to bear in mind: the fungal growths of Early Access. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Mycopunk's smart design has made me remember what it's like to enjoy a co-op shooter again.

79

My friend carrying my torso back towards my legs.



FAR LEFT: Not how I wanted my one to one to go.

LEFT: Cat. Enough said.

Death by one million lasers.

SHORT ORDER CHEF

Make friends with food in TALES OF THE SHIRE: A THE LORD OF THE RINGS GAME

By Christopher Livingston

Bilbo Baggins' trip to Lonely Mountain (and back again) in The Hobbit was roughly 3,000 kilometres. In *Tales of the Shire: A The Lord of the Rings Game*, I feel like I've run at least half that distance without ever leaving the tiny town of Bywater. I cook, I fish, I farm – but most of my time is spent using my big ol' hairy feet to skip back and forth between the dozen hobbits who regularly need my help.

That's not unusual for a life sim – I sprint like crazy through *Stardew Valley*, too – but despite all the bustling around I do in Bywater, there's not quite enough to do to fill my days. Some of the activities are good ones: the cooking system is one of my favourite in games ever, and foraging for ingredients through the beautifully detailed Bywater is pleasantly chill, but fishing is too basic to be interesting and farming is a letdown.

I just wish the rest of Tales' systems were as enjoyable as its cooking

ROAST MUTTON

In *Tales of the Shire*, you're a recent transplant to Bywater, a town so small the official hobbit government doesn't even consider it a real town. And who better to organise the locals into getting their act together than a complete stranger? Luckily, there's a great way for an outsider to earn the trust of the local halflings, and that's through their stomachs.

Cooking in *Tales of the Shire* is excellent – and yes, you can have all the meals Pippin helpfully listed in The Fellowship of the Ring: breakfast, second breakfast, elevenses, luncheon, afternoon tea, dinner and supper. Step into the kitchen and pick a recipe, then add the ingredients you've foraged or grown, like puffy mushrooms, shiny fruits and hearty vegetables, and those you've bought or traded for, like meat, cheese, flour and cream.

The ideal version of the meal you're making has a little target on your cooking HUD, and hitting it means adjusting the smoothness or chunkiness of the dish (depending on how vigorously you chop the ingredients) as well as the crispness or tenderness (which can be fine-tuned in the frying pan, saucepan, and other kitchen implements). While the stovetop is sizzling you can also mix in extra flavours at each step, adding sugar, salt, cinnamon, butter, and lots of herbs and spices to make flavour combos that improve the quality of the meal.

It's a fun and tactile minigame I enjoy each time I do it: pouring some ingredients into a mixing bowl, chopping others with a big cleaver, then flipping and tossing them in a sizzling pan. It takes a while to learn just how much or little to chop or fry each ingredient to precisely create the ultimate version of each dish, but even if you miss the mark, the finished meals are always look delicious: from sticky berry jams to crispy fish pies, to tarts filled with fruits and cream.

I just wish the rest of *Tales*' systems were as enjoyable as its cooking – and I wish there were more to do in general. Foraging is pleasant enough, especially because chasing butterflies and lightning bugs will lead you to hard-to-spot ingredients, a nice fairytale-style touch. The fishing minigame is a little too simple to be good, though, absent the layer of complexity of lures and bait most other life sims add.

Quests require a lot of running back and forth between hobbits to deliver messages and have short conversations. The main quest is a long one, to elevate the town to official status in the Shire, but to spread it out over the course of the game there are often gaps where you simply have to wait for the next part to begin by ending the day and starting the next. A lot of quests are of the 'the princess is in another castle' variety: while trying to track down a missing book, each hobbit I questioned sent me to another, and then another. It's a lot of running around, and frankly, I'd much rather be at home cooking.

With such a beautifully presented world and an excellent cooking system, it's a shame the rest of *Tales of the Shire* doesn't stack up that well. Gandalf sure loves the Shire, but I can't quite say the same. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A cosy life sim set in a the small hobbit town of Bywater

EXPECT TO PAY
$44.95

DEVELOPER
Weta Workshop

PUBLISHER
Private Division

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7 9700K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4070 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
No

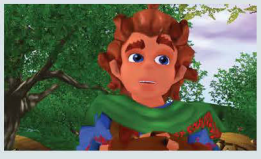
LINK
talesoftheshire.com

FELLOWSHIP

Other games starring Hobbits

LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE
Be a burglar, blow pipeweed smoke rings, and have an epic adventure, just like Bilbo.

LEGO: THE HOBBIT
Fight trolls and orcs, solve puzzles with the dwarves, and explore Middle-earth.



THE HOBBIT
It's gonna be hard to find this adventure game gem from 2003, but it'll be worth it.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: GOLLUM
We don't talk about this one. In fact, forget I even brought it up.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Tales of the Shire has great cooking and foraging systems, but not a lot else to keep you busy.

67

Balbo Goodenough
What's the most important part of the Shirriff's job?
Orlo Proudfoot
It's just the wind and the weather blowing branches off the trees. Best thing is to get in there and clear it up myself.
The town often gets together to meet. And squabble.

ABOVE LEFT: You'll find plenty of fishing spots. Eventually.

BELOW LEFT: Certain plants buff each other when grown together.

COOL TITLES FOR NO CASH by Tom Sykes

Interacting with the Heavy Mach causes it to demonstrate its devastating weapon.

FORM AND FUNCTION

Prodding aliens to see what happens in FORMLESS STAR

Like *No Man's Sky* if it had been doodled into an exercise book, *Formless Star* is a game about visiting an alien planet and recording all the weird animals that live there. And there are some really fascinatingly strange creatures here: like a sentient die, and a big pane of glass that insists on recklessly dashing everywhere, and an 'animal' that is actually the coolest pixel art mech I've ever seen.

But *Formless Star* isn't a game about photographing these animals from a distance – it's a game where you discover the creatures by sidling up and interacting with them. Every one of the 61 creatures (well, maybe not the last one, which is a special case), rewards your curiosity with a funny factoid, and more importantly with unique functions and animations.

Take the Pickler, which chucks its head into the air and permanently destroys any tile it lands on, or the circular Orrery, which inhales you into a miniature solar system before teleporting you clear across the map. More than the function these interactions perform (which is almost never useful, though amusingly so), it's the quality of the animation that makes interacting with every single animal worth it. This is gorgeous, fluid pixel art boasting some of the best creature designs you'll find in, well, anything.

Gorgeous pixel art boasting some of the best creatures you'll find

SHIP SHAPE

That really is your only goal: to wander around the planet and interact with everything, with no barriers in the open world that can't be overcome, with a little perseverance. The planet is randomly generated every time you start (or you return to your ship), though any animals you've met will stay met, thankfully. I'm not sure if you need to return to your ship for the rarer animals to be introduced, but it's a good idea anyway, to refresh the gaff if you find yourself stuck. No matter how the patchwork planet has been jumbled together for its latest iteration, you will always have the tools to explore every inch of it.

Bush or tree (or jelly mound) standing in your way? Press the action button and the little hero will whack it down. Confronted by a tile of water, or a whole coastline preventing you from visiting an island? The action button will automatically make a bridge tile, with infinite wood pulled out of your back pocket. Meanwhile, the greater obstacle – getting lost – is solved by teleporting

After two hours, I can't deny that weariness was settling in, but the in-game hints helped me discover the last few pesky animals. I'm glad I finished the game, because the final creature put this whole planet into perspective, enriching your achievement with a beautiful message. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A cosy game about cataloguing weird aliens on an uncharted planet

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
splendidland

PUBLISHER
splendidland

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/FormlessStar

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

There's no danger, just good vibes and fun aliens in this touching exploration game.

81

BELOW: Not sure I would have agreed to this if I knew what was involved.

VIDEODROME

The flesh is willing in THE NEW FLESH

It might be a game set at an intersection, but *The New Flesh* ably demonstrates how to keep a small space feeling exciting, even as you trudge round its streets for the third or fourth time.

In this first-person exploration game, you've arrived in a weird parallel city looking for videotapes to cram into a flasher's abdominal cavity. This creepy fella is your first quest-giver, though to be fair the tapes aren't hard to find, as you explore a chunk of an empty city and get teleported to several fantastical locations. It's like someone lopped off a wing of Cosmo D's surreal exploration game *Off-Peak*, then made it a licensed tie-in for the band Red Vox.

So yes, that last bit: this game is sort of a promotional thing, containing a few songs from the band's upcoming album. These songs trigger as you enter certain locations, and usually accompany ambitious, playable sequences that contort or otherwise transform the environment around you. I'd never heard of the band, and I still know nothing about them other than that their pleasant indie rock music soundtracked these sequences pretty well.

I didn't get the sense that these surreal environments have anything to do with the band, and I'd urge you to give it a go if you want to witness some impressive visual effects and transitions. On the exploration side, once you've filled that fella full of VHS, you're suddenly doing a cat's bidding, though in a city being transformed by falling sand. New locations are in reach, as the game builds towards its spectacular ending. Promo game or not, this is exciting stuff. ■

73

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Freshly Baked Games	bit.ly/TheNewFlesh

LOSE YOURSELF

Survival at all costs in ONE'S OWN EXILE

Games about grim survival usually invite us to make hard choices by killing or betraying other people, but what if the person you have to betray is yourself? That's the question *One's Own Exile* grapples with, as you try to escape a society where difference is feared, and ultimately eliminated.

After your bazaar is ransacked, you decide to flee from tyranny and to the safety of the Northern kingdom. However, to do that you'll need to pass through a heavily guarded checkpoint. Go as you are and the guards will kill you on the spot. But to pass as one of the regular townsfolk, you will need to strip away everything you are.

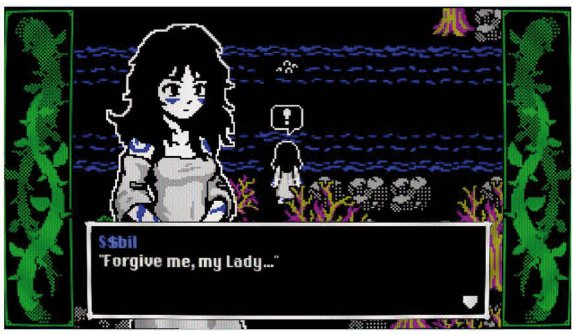
Sybil, the protagonist, outlines it neatly at the start, saying that she will need to cut her long hair, throw her religious items away, basically destroy all trace of her culture to pass the checkpoint and survive the witch hunt that is coming for her. And that's not even the hardest part, as she contemplates searing away her tattoos. You have these tasks to perform in the town, and every step is horrifying to watch, as parts of Sybil and her culture are torn away until there is almost nothing left.

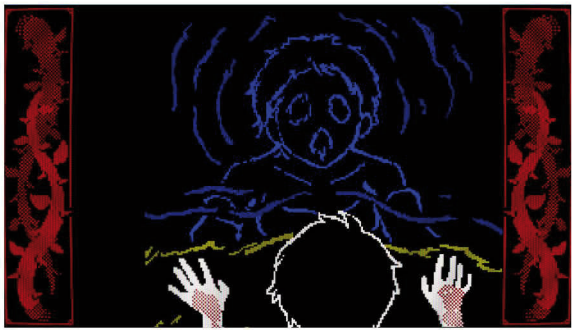
I haven't discovered all the endings. I don't know how to discover the other ones but this was a powerful story as I erased Sybil's identity and approached the checkpoint with every finger crossed.

The ending I got for that effort felt inevitable, the climax that had been teased at the start, even if I wanted to tell Sybil that hair can regrow, and icons can be fashioned anew. Survival in the face of horror is nothing to sniff at. ■

72

BELOW: To blend in, you will need to throw away the icons of your religion.





NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Updog Software	bit.ly/OnesExile

GROUP TEST

BUDGET TO MID-RANGE GPUs

It's all about the money, money, money. And the performance, of course

By Andy Edser

You'd be forgiven for thinking that buying a GPU on a budget was a near-impossible task these days. But while retailer prices are still higher than we'd like, it's possible to pick up a brand new 1080p and 1440p graphics-cruncher from the likes of Nvidia, AMD, and Intel for sensible cash.

From the surprisingly affordable Intel Arc B580 to the mid-range-munching AMD Radeon RX 9070, there's some serious competition in the reasonably-priced GPU market right now. So, if cash is king, these are your current options for keeping your bank balance frosty and your gaming PC bang up-to-date.

GeForce RTX 5060

NVIDIA $649

Budget, but at what cost?

1 Nvidia's budget GPU has, on paper at least, a fair bit going for it. With a $550 to $650 street price, it slots into the bottom stack of team green's current lineup as the most affordable, if perhaps not the most exciting option available.

The little Nvidia card uses the GB206 Blackwell variant with 3,840 CUDA cores – a 30% increase over the previous RTX 4060 – and sure enough, the RTX 5060 handily outperforms the previous model. Although not always by as much as you might expect.

It's still capable of a reasonable turn of speed, mind. The *Metro Exodus Enhanced* benchmark running at 1440p Ultra results in a 63 fps average, 13 frames more than the RTX 4060. That being said, it gets its lunch eaten by the $599 AMD RX 9060 XT across our benchmarking suite, making the Nvidia card difficult to recommend when prices remain even between the two. Its 8GB of VRAM also feels a little tight in 2025 – even if it's just about good enough for 1080p and 1440p gaming as things stand.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Well-priced
- Small and efficient
- Far from exciting

SPECS BOOST CLOCK: 2497MHZ / **VRAM:** 8 GB GDDR7

GeForce RTX 5060 Ti

NVIDIA $759

A good upgrade proposition

2 Now this is more like it. At $679 for the 8GB model and $759 for the 16GB variant, the RTX 5060 Ti delivers a weighty chunk of performance for your cash. It makes a whole lot of sense as a reasonably-priced upgrade for an ageing rig, providing you can get one for close to MSRP.

It's also a GB206 Blackwell GPU, but this time with significantly more CUDA cores and a higher boost clock than the RTX 5060. Small changes on paper, but when it comes to real-world performance, the RTX 5060 Ti makes for an attractive 1080p and 1440p performer. 75 fps at 1080p in *Black Myth Wukong* at High is nothing to be sniffed at, although you'll still want to take advantage of DLSS 4 and Multi Frame Generation to get the most out of it.

Where the card falls down, however, is when you compare it to the significantly cheaper AMD RX 9060 XT once more. While the RTX 5060 Ti edges ahead of it in many benchmarks, it's remarkably close – which should make Nvidia worry at this price point.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- 20% faster than the RTX 4060 Ti
- Excellent overclocking potential
- Trades with cheaper RX 9060 XT

SPECS BOOST CLOCK: 2572MHZ / **VRAM:** 8 GB/16 GB GDDR7

COULD PERHAPS BE CALLED THE MOST ANTICIPATED GRAPHICS CARD OF THIS GENERATION

GROUP TEST

RX 9060 XT

AMD $599

A budget barnstormer

3 Here's the card that's been giving Nvidia's budget range a headache. While the RTX 5060 Ti is capable of outpacing the RX 9060 XT overall, it's by such a slim margin the significantly-cheaper AMD card makes for a more attractive penny-pinching buy. It delivers great performance at 1080p and 1440p resolutions, given the minimal outlay.

The RX 9060 XT isn't without its caveats, however. Being an AMD card, you won't be able to take advantage of DLSS 4 and Multi Frame Generation. FSR 4 is AMD's latest equivalent, but support is limited – and the frame gen is of the 2x variety, although works fairly well overall.

Still, AMD's RDNA4 improvements really have come good with the RX 9060 XT. It doesn't baulk at ray tracing like the RDNA3 cards, and it boosts to 3GHz+ clockspeeds straight out of the box, resulting in respectable performance for the cash. You won't manage much of an overclock, though, as this card's been pushed to its limits straight from the factory.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- RTX 5060 Ti-like performance
- Attractive price
- No Multi Frame Gen

SPECS **BOOST CLOCK:** 3130MHZ / **VRAM:** 8 GB/16 GB GDDR6

GeForce RTX 5070

NVIDIA $1,099

Not the GPU we were hoping for

4 The RTX 5070 could perhaps be called the most anticipated graphics card of this generation, piggybacking off the popularity of the RTX 4070 before it. The GB205 die at its heart, however, simply doesn't provide the performance boost we were hoping for – beating the previous generation RTX 4070 Super by just 13% overall.

That being said, Multi Frame Generation still works its magic at 1440p, although input latency is an issue when pushed to its limits. Nvidia's lower-stack RTX 50-series cards have a tendency to highlight the downsides of the tech, and with a relatively unimpressive raw raster performance boost lying underneath it, the RTX 5070 starts to come unstuck.

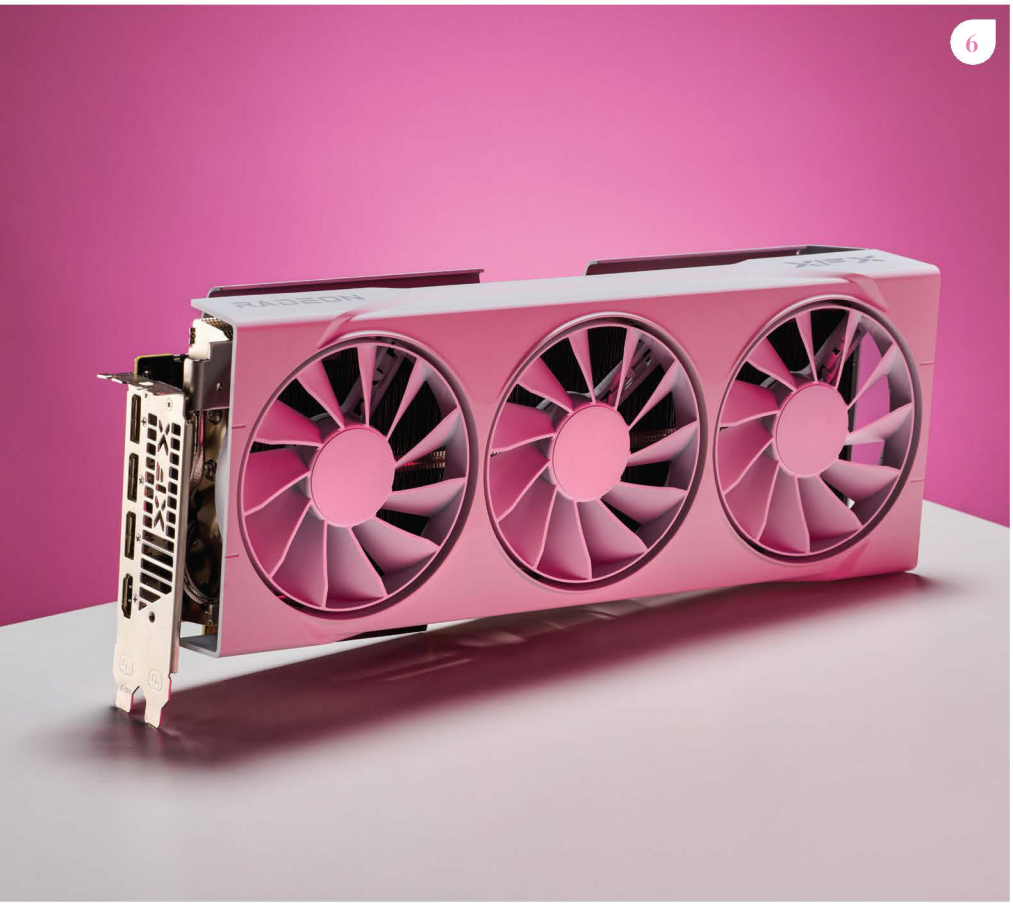
All of this would be easy to swallow if the RTX 5070 was cheap, but we're only just starting to see some cards retail at around the $999 mark. Put the similarly-priced AMD Radeon RX 9070 alongside it, and the Nvidia card really is relying on MFG to make a name for itself.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Multi Frame Gen works well at 1440p
- Slower than the RX 9070
- Not faster than the RTX 4070 Super

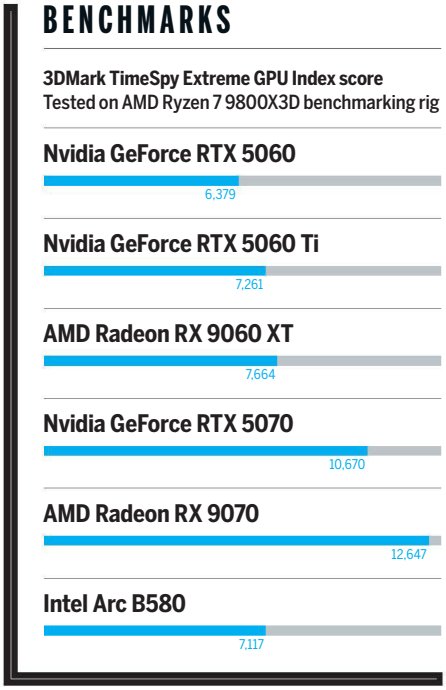
SPECS **BOOST CLOCK:** 2512MHZ / **VRAM:** 16 GB GDDR7

COMFORTABLY BEATS THE RTX 5070 WITH RASTER PERFORMANCE



BENCHMARKS

3DMark TimeSpy Extreme GPU Index score
Tested on AMD Ryzen 7 9800X3D benchmarking rig



Radeon RX 9070

AMD **$1,099**

Good performance, if a touch over-priced

5 As mid-range cards go, the RX 9070 makes a good case for itself as the GPU to covet this generation. It's not far off its technically more expensive sibling, the RX 9070 XT, in our benchmarks, and comfortably beats the RTX 5070 with raster performance headroom to spare. Max headroom.

However, like most graphics cards right now, what you end up paying at the checkout is often significantly more than the MSRP suggests.

We've seen the RX 9070 retail reliably around the $1,000 mark in Australia, although US buyers have had a better time of things, with the odd card available for US$650 or less.

What this means in practice is the RX 9070 XT is often available for only $100-$150 more – and that's a card that gives the RTX 5070 Ti a run for its money. Pricing this generation has made comparing these GPUs like-for-like something of a nightmare, but if you can pick one up for somewhere near its MSRP, this is the mid-range card I'd plump for as things stand.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- More powerful than the RTX 5070
- Not far behind the RX 9070 XT
- $100 price premium is disappointing

SPECS **BOOST CLOCK:** 2520MHZ / **VRAM:** 16 GB GDDR6

Arc B580

INTEL **$499**

Your mileage may vary

6 What would a graphics card roundup be without a wildcard, and Intel really has provided with the Arc B580. This 12GB Battlemage GPU is capable of delivering a surprising whack of gaming performance for $500... when it decides to play ball.

We experienced crashing issues with our test sample in certain games at certain settings, due to some misbehaving drivers. Updates have improved the situation since then, but Intel's graphics driver support has been an Achilles' heel for all of its GPU offerings, and the B580 still has the odd issue in newer games.

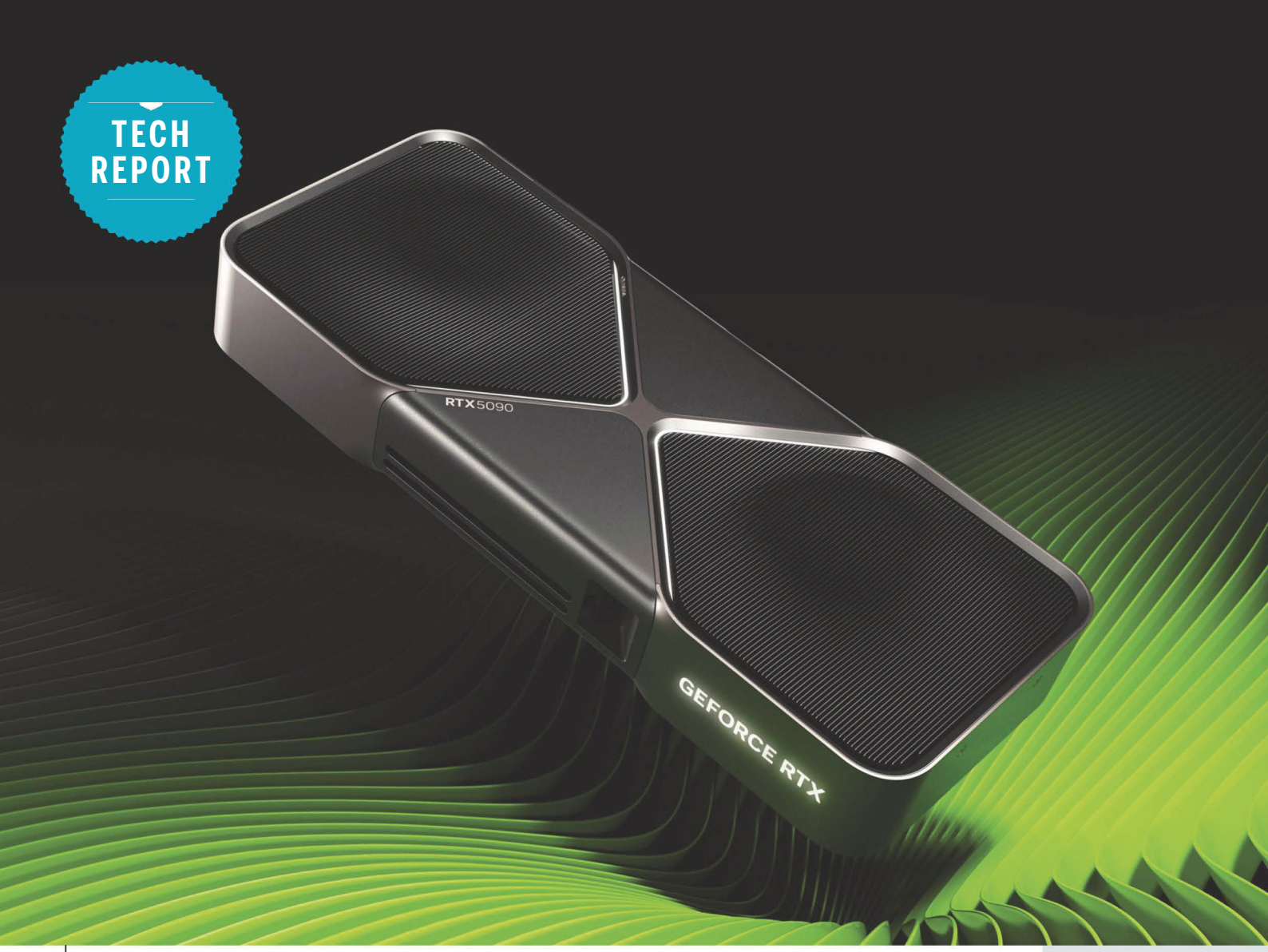
That being said, the B580 is capable of giving the RTX 4060 a good thrashing when it's running at full tilt, but it disappears quickly into the shade in real-world gaming performance when compared to the more recent offerings here. Still, you can pick one up for a very low price – but you need to be willing to take the rough with the smooth if you decide to plump for one of these. One for the tech troubleshooting inclined, perhaps.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- About as cheap as modern GPUs get
- Drivers remain a question mark
- Outpaced by recent competition

SPECS **BOOST CLOCK:** 2670MHZ / **VRAM:** 12 GB GDDR6

TECH REPORT



FRAME PASS

High unit pricing is pushing PC hardware towards a subscription model

Early in 2023, rumours began to circulate that Apple had plans to introduce a subscription service for iPhone hardware. Users would pay a monthly fee, and in return they'd get access to, but crucially not ownership of, the latest available iPhone model, whenever it was released.

This was different to buying an iPhone in instalments, or a 'buy now, pay later' credit plan. There was no end point. No final payment, after which the hardware became yours. Like the software on Xbox Game Pass, users would simply have been paying monthly to use it and when the monthly fees stopped, the access dried up.

By late 2024 those – rumoured – plans had been scrapped by Apple, said analysts. They cited regulatory concerns and software considerations. For anyone with a dedicated gaming PC, that was a close call.

Not because Apple's subscription service would have directly affected our access to the RGB tower of teraFLOPS we all keep for our arcane experiments, but because Apple's market position means it sets the trend. If the world's third-biggest company by market cap decides its customers shouldn't own hardware any more, but commit to indefinite monthly payments for it instead, you can bet that everyone from AMD to Zotac will pay attention.

Happening in parallel to those murmurings, Nvidia's last two generations of GPU have shifted dramatically in pricing. At a time when having to buy olive oil and butter in the same weekly food shop feels like a major financial hit, the RTX 3-series and 4-series cards asked us to pay four figures for one component upgrade. That priced out a lot of enthusiasts who might have previously been able to afford top-end models, and forced many of us to revise our upgrade cadence strategy. Buying into the new generation each time, however nice the puddles look on Nvidia's ray-tracing demos, is not a sound financial tactic.

SILVER LININGS

GeForce Now should offer the solution to all of this: you pay a monthly fee for access to an RTX 4080 via the cloud, and take the rendering workload off your local hardware. GeForce Now's 'Ultimate' option provides access to the aforementioned card along with 16 vCPUs, 4K display streaming and up to sessions up to eight hours long for $27.50 per month. Considering the RTX 4080's $1,659 launch price, it would take 60 months of GeForce Now Ultimate membership before your fees would eclipse the cost of the card.

However, as impressive as GeForce Now may be, and as great as its progress has been, it's not a completely satisfying alternative to owning high-end hardware and using it to run

A short hike

One pitfall to consider when entering into any subscription is the potential for price hikes. Netflix and Game Pass both used this strategy to great effect over the years, going to market with an extremely low monthly fee to drive acquisitions and then slowly turning the screw. Inaction is part of human nature – how many of the users who signed up to Game Pass when it cost $1 per month are still subscribed and paying ten times that much? Still, you could always just cancel it, and lose access to your entire game library. Easy peasy.

FAR LEFT: Nvidia's cloud-based GeForce Now offers a non-predatory alternative to hardware ownership.

LEFT: NZXT's foray into gaming hardware subscription has become a cautionary tale.

FEE AND EASY *Four firsts in the gaming subscription world*

MERIDIAN 59
Released in 1996, this was the first MMORPG that required a monthly subscription to play.

iRACING
A 2008 racing sim that shook up the driving genre with its MMO-style payment model.

LOOTCRATE
'Comic Con in a box' was the concept behind this 2012 gaming merch monthly loot drop.

GAME PASS
How time flies – Microsoft's game library service first launched all the way back in 2017.

games locally. There's still that slight, just-about-perceptible feeling of latency, and in a realm where we agonise over specific shadow quality settings and notice even minor frame drops, that matters. But more than that, it's an ideological mismatch with PC gaming.

Since its earliest cultural formation, PC gaming has been about co-opting hardware that was intended for general use and customising it in order to optimise it for specific uses instead. It's taken its cues from car culture, which (partially) explains our love of coloured lighting and liquid coolers. It's about self-expression almost as much as it's about performance. We're tinkerers, and historically we've been more than happy to brave a BIOS screen searching for values that might unlock minute overclocking gains. Taking that all away to a computer farm that you log into and stream your games back from is something different. It's gaming, but it's not PC gaming.

IN THE REAL WORLD, WE KNOW THAT PEOPLE DON'T JUST STOP GAMING

FLEX BOX

But that hasn't stopped companies like NZXT experimenting with subscription models for the use of local hardware. In the US NZXT Flex offers three tiers of gaming PC, priced between $59 and $169 per month. You pay the monthly subscription fee in exchange for use of that hardware. It's not streaming via the cloud, it's sitting in your house and doing its thing for you locally, but like Apple's rumoured hardware subscription it's purely an access fee, not instalments towards ownership. You stop paying, the PC goes away. It's fair to say NZXT experienced some pushback on that particular service. Users cited high monthly fees, unclear financial terms, slow dispute resolution times and... just about every other aspect of the service, frankly. NZXT released a classic 'addressing your concerns but markedly not apologising' sort of statement, which has done precisely nothing to dislodge the negative sentiment that Flex generated.

Flex is a valuable example of why hardware-as-a-service doesn't work for us in PC gaming: it's a great idea for the manufacturer, who can ship out old inventory and receive predictable, consistent monthly earnings in exchange, but offers no benefit to the consumer. None. Subscription fees are generally priced at a similar level to monthly instalments that would eventually lead to ownership. Service providers would argue the tradeoff for that is the flexibility, since users are free to cancel their subscription at any point and send the hardware back. In the real world, we know that people don't just stop gaming.

Obviously there's a bigger trend at play here that's driven the likes of NZXT to experiment with this business model. The shows we watch, the games we play, and even the software we use to do our jobs, are all offered via a subscription plan, and as much as we all loathe it, it's working. We're paying out. But there are some frontiers where subscription-creep hasn't yet slithered its tendrils and taken hold, and we should all do our best to keep gaming hardware ownership as slippery and impossible to subsume as possible. Otherwise, we're locked into a direct debit from now until forever, to access something that began as a form of self-expression. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

TECH TALES

28 TAPS LATER

Using Typing of the Dead as a benchmark for gaming keyboard performance

If you want to find out how good a graphics card is, you fire up the benchmark mode in a nice graphically demanding game. Same goes for a CPU, only you use a more CPU-bound title like *Total War: Warhammer*. You watch the automated sequence, you note down the numbers that the benchmark spits back out at you, and you use those numbers to rank one component against another.

But when you want to find out how good a peripheral is, Night City can't help you and the efficacy of that *Hitman: World of Assassination* benchmark with the stately home getting shot to bits is limited at best. It's not that you're going on vibes, exactly, since there are still reasonably empirical aspects like tech specs to compare alongside your subjective experience of the comfort and performance. But in comparison to benching a GPU, it can be frustratingly nebulous to appraise something like a gaming keyboard.

Which is how I came to regularly commune with the quarter-century-old Sega arcade oddity, *Typing of the Dead*. First released into Japanese arcades in 1999, it was a spin-off from the hugely popular *House of the Dead* lightgun game. Only instead of a lightgun to shoot the zombies with, this time you had a keyboard.

The titular dead turned up onscreen with a word or phrase overlaid. You typed the word, bullet sounds rang out, and the reanimated corpse fell to the ground as if defeated by your sheer typing accuracy. A year later in 2000, the PC and console releases followed.

At a time when PC players routinely saw mangled, barely playable ports of arcade and console titles, here was a game whose entire existence seemed to be a sarcastic joke about that situation. No lightgun? No problem. Just type random words that appear on the screen, that's as good as shooting them!

THE LIFE-AND-DEATH STAKES OF FRANTICALLY TYPING 'HOW'S YOUR BRA?'

And yet, it works brilliantly. Something about the absurdity of the situation, the life-and-death stakes of frantically typing 'How's your bra?' or 'Deciduous trees' while a moaning, pallid cadaver lurches towards the screen is just too much to resist.

QWERTY AND THRIVING

Obviously, though, it's not just the sheer enjoyment of a 25-year-old typing game that drew me in. Here is a title that offers a rare chance to quantify, with statistics and measurable gaming performance, the merits of a particular keyboard. That's a game changer.

Clearly it's not just me who feels this way about the minutiae of different mechanical switches and backplate materials. The enthusiast keyboard market is reaching ever-more granular levels of customisation, to the extent that models like Corsair's Makr 75 are basically just PCBS and empty chassis with vast switch options and modding potential. You could just pick the ones that sound nice, or feel good when you push down on them when the pressure's off and there isn't a zombie about to tear your epidermis off and munch it like a wet burrito. Or you could use science.

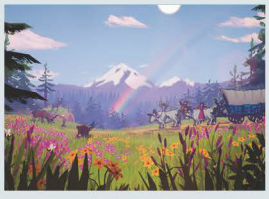
I opted for science. It's become an odd and comforting routine for me now to load up *Typing of the Dead Overkill* on Steam whenever I'm trying out a new board. That's the 2014 re-release, with tons of DLC, so I'm very unlikely to run out of words anytime soon.

The thing is, you really do get a quick and accurate indication about how well you're going to be able to play and work with a particular keyboard just from one level of *TotD*. It's not just the switches. It's the amount of actuation each keypress requires, the lateral movement (how much the key wiggles around, basically) and how steeply they're stacked in relation to each other. Personally I'm often tripped up by boards that exaggerate the height differences between the

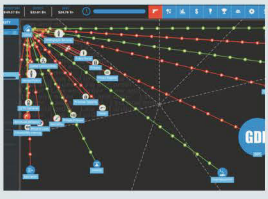
PHIL IWANIUK
Wizened old freelancer Phil is currently working on a modding project that lets him test monitor refresh rates in *Dance Dance Revolution*. The neighbours are not happy.

SCHOOL'S IN *The Mount Rushmore of edutainment games*

WHERE IN THE WORLD IS CARMEN SANDIEGO?
A sneaky 1985 point-and-click that got us learning geography by accident. For shame, Carmen.



THE OREGON TRAIL
Pictured here in its modern form, this timeless dysentery sim has been teaching us that frontier life was hard for decades.



DEMOCRACY
Straight-faced strategy series less interested in you having fun than understanding the accountability of legislatures.

THE MAGIC SCHOOL BUS
That's more like it. A dangerously potent injection of primary colours and cheeriness, under the guise of learning.

QWERTY and ASDF rows, and there's no clearer indication of that than seeing the Venetian undead pull apart and eat a civilian you have failed to save.

THE MISSING LINK

What's especially satisfying about this routine I've adopted is that it represents the final frontier of quantifiable peripheral testing. Mice are relatively simple to evaluate: you work through the tech specs, feel it out for comfort and then play a bunch of aim trainer games. Headsets give you specifics like perceptible distortion recorded mic audio to complement the spec sheet items with. But until now, keyboards simply either felt good or bad when you used them.

There are plenty of other typing tests out there, obviously. Google 'typing speed test' and you'll find dozens of very similar browser-based games which give you stat readouts at the end just like *TotD* does. But to this day, nobody's committed to gamifying typing like Sega did in 1999, and for that feat of absurdity, in return, I'm committing to making it my evergreen benchmarking tool. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

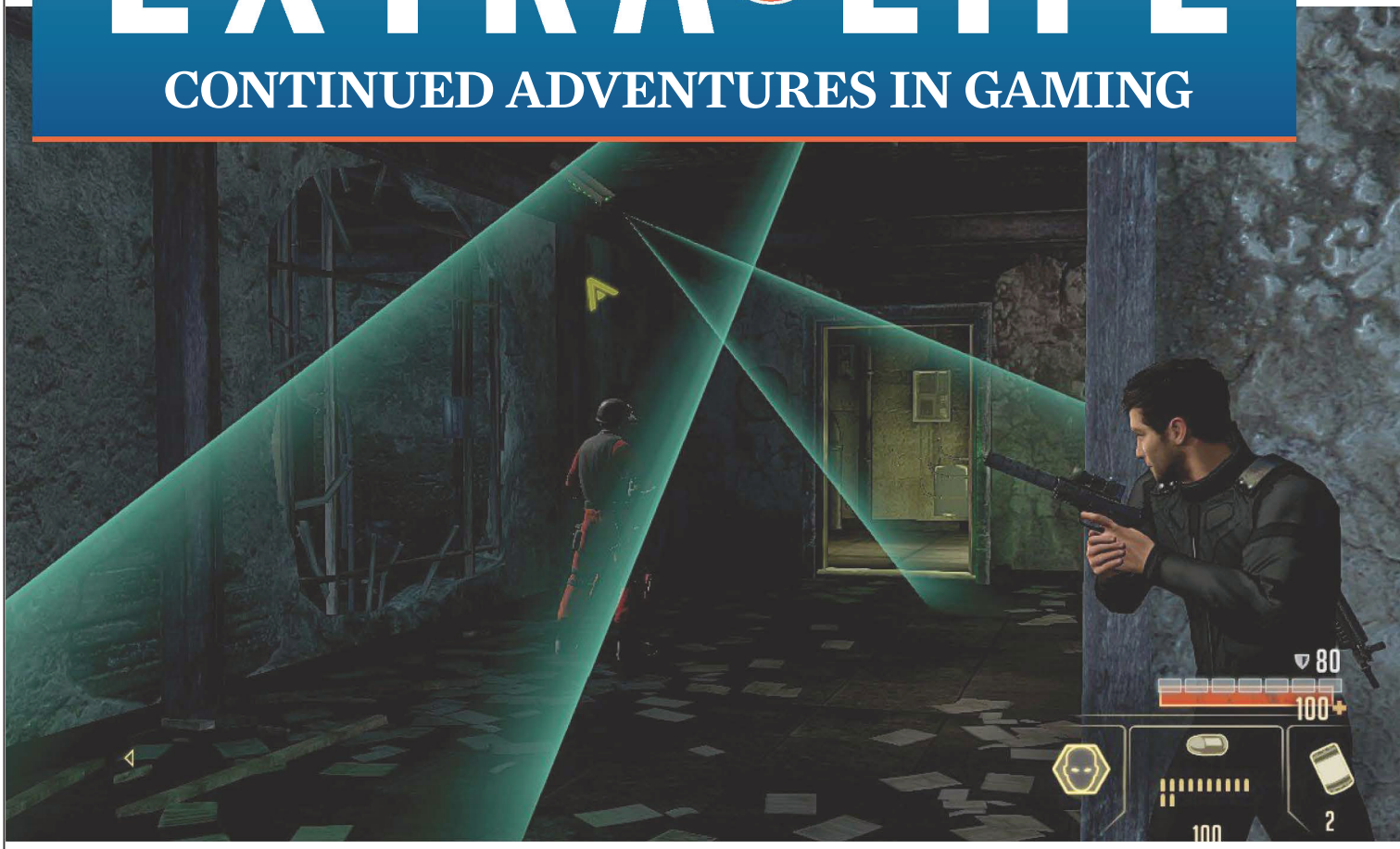
ABOVE: Type 'quintessence of dust' or it's curtains. You always knew it would come to this.

BELOW: Mechanical switches aren't easy to evaluate empirically. Not without Sega's help.

The enthusiast keyboard market is getting enthusiast-er. Time to quantify them.

EXTRA LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



"I will embrace Suave Mike and become The Most Cancelled Man"

Learning the art of spycraft in ALPHA PROTOCOL

My name is Agent Michael Thorton, and every dialogue is a minefield: two thirds of the options will turn me into The Most Cancelled Man Who Ever Lived. The *Mass Effect*-y archetypes I'm provided with correspond to the spy guy holy trinity: Borne (Professional), Bond (Suave), and Bauer (Aggressive).

Aggressive Mike is a Renegade psycho, greeting an information broker by slamming his face into a bar. Suave Mike is a pervert. I want to strap him to the Clockwork Orange chair just to make him watch corporate anti-harassment training videos. Professional Mike? Nice guy. A little slow. I like the cut of his jib.

And by god are this Unreal Engine 3 potato man and all his deep state pals rubbing off on me? I was worried mission control stalwart Mina Tang's consummate professionalism would wear thin, but her competence belies a wry charm.

Seeing her and Professional Mike open up to each other has this really endearing quality, like watching two mathletes fall in love for the first time. Terrorist mastermind Ali Shaheed has also proven a surprise favourite – he's actually pretty swell once you get to know him.

This game is so janky, but it's charming the pants off me. Very of its era with a plasticky sheen of Xbox 360 over everything and controls that will thrash against you if you try to use a keyboard and mouse instead of a gamepad – shout out to the kind of fun lockpicking minigame, and the awful hacking.

In other ways, *Alpha Protocol* harkens back even further in time: a skill system with a dozen options but only two worth a damn (stealth and pistols) – this is an action RPG in the crusty tradition of yore, and after ten years of Sony first party action RPGs with all the character sanded off, I crave lopsided, horribly unbalanced, but unforgettable games like *Alpha Protocol*.

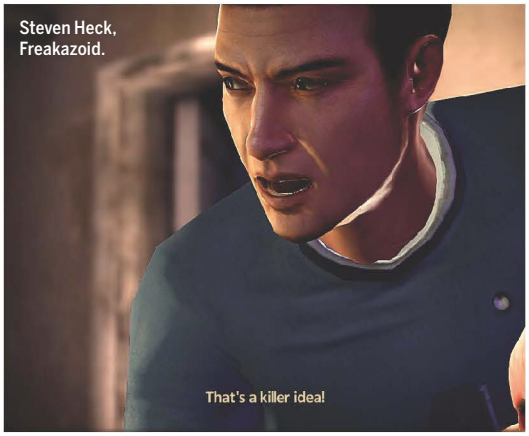
TED LITCHFIELD

THIS MONTH
Saved the free world by crouch walking through Saudi Arabia.

ALSO PLAYED
System Shock 2: 25th Anniversary Remake

TOP: Absolutely nothing usual to see here.

THIS GAME IS SO JANKY, BUT IT'S CHARMING THE PANTS OFF ME



EMOTIONAL MANIPULATION

Alpha Protocol's already proving to have a web of choices, potential main character deaths, and ending permutations that is surely one of Obsidian's most complex to date, up there with *Fallout: New Vegas* and *Pillars of Eternity 2: Deadfire*. Each major or minor character, including the antagonists, have *Knights of the Old Republic 2*-style influence meters, and Obsidian beat BioWare's *Dragon Age 2* by a year in offering surprise benefits for getting on people's bad sides.

I'm starting to come out of my shell more with deploying psycho Aggressive Mike and Suave Mike, the pervert. A major information broker in Taipei is a manic, self-aggrandising bro – played by Nolan North in his peak 'Nolan North, everywhere' era – who yearns for a fellow freak to swap spy stories with. Suave Mike, you're up.

To get in with good Taipei underground freakazoid Steven Heck, I will embrace Suave Mike and become The Most Cancelled Man Who Ever Lived, at least for a time – donning the mask without becoming it. I just hope my good boy-loving spy girlfriend Mina Tang doesn't find out. ■

All that armour won't help you now.

"Empowerment out of vulnerability"

Playing STEALTH GAMES is frustrating but compelling

IAN EVENDEN

THIS MONTH
Lurked in the darkness, hoping not to be noticed.

ALSO PLAYED
Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines

Stealth games are something I've always admired, ever since I sat and watched a friend playing *Metal Gear Solid* on his PlayStation, but have usually been unable to participate in.

There's something about them that just rubs me up the wrong way. I'm not sure if it's the insta-fail nature of many of them, where a single moment of exposure leads to an army coming down on your fragile protagonist, or if it's the passive nature of hiding when you've invariably got an arsenal you could be using. I would much rather be an active participant in other people's doom. I am not a subtle gamer.

There have been moments, however, when I've managed to pull off stealth. The first *Far Cry*, which asks you to hide in thigh-length undergrowth while wearing a red Hawaiian shirt, is perhaps the earliest: crouched down and holding a machine gun while enemy goons came ever closer, I felt the sense of empowerment out of vulnerability that a good stealth game can provide. "I'm doing it, I'm doing it," I remember thinking. Then I stood up and gunned them down.

The important thing in a stealth game is that the enemies are appropriately dumb. *Indiana Jones and the Great Circle* gets this right – its Nazis are half blind, good at looking the other way, slow to react and easily distracted. Gina, though, is invisible to them, and it would be great if Indy could just send her on errands alone, such is her ability to walk in the open without being seen.

Wolfenstein: The New Order, on the surface the antithesis of a stealth game, actually has a surprising capacity for sneakiness. The open maps give you the chance to slip around back streets before plunging a knife into a guard's neck, but also gives you the tools to defend yourself when things inevitably go loud. Nothing gives you more confidence while slinking through the shadows than the knowledge that you have an automatic shotgun in your pocket.

As games continue to blend action sequences with slower, quieter sections, it's hard to avoid stealth. You don't have to be good at it, but you do have to understand the rules. Despite this, I am still unable to finish the first section of *Metal Gear Solid*. ■

"Taking on Fulghor was child's play – the centaur didn't stand a chance"

I learnt how to become a team player in ELDEN RING NIGHTREIGN

There's no proximity chat, no voice lines. Just three strangers dropped into a smallish version of Limgrave's map with by the bosses that caused you pain in *Elden Ring* and *Shadow of the Erdtree*, with a couple of guest appearances from *Dark Souls III*. If that sounds chaotic, that's because it is.

Playing with randoms in *Nightreign* is a bit of a coin flip – you either get someone who'd rather run across the whole map to pick up a talisman than stick with the rest of the group, or the most coordinated and talented monsters that have ever graced the Lands Between.

The latter instance is what dreams are made of. The other day I matched with two Soulsborne veterans who guided me across *Nightreign*'s maps over both days killing every single boss in our path, including all but one of the legends hiding in the Rotted Woods. By the end of the second day, I was level 14 with weapons like Bastard's Stars, Hand of Malenia and the Black Knife at my disposal. Taking on Fulghor was child's play at that point – the poor centaur didn't stand a chance. Unfortunately, not all runs are made equal. Sometimes when everyone has a plan you need to learn how to compromise without the help of talking it out, only by using the humble ping button.

ELIE GOULD

THIS MONTH
I decided to 'Git Gud'.

ALSO PLAYED
FBC: Firebreak,
Mio: Memories in Orbit

OFFER AN ACCORD

Using the ping function on the map has not only become second nature to me but it's almost like a new language. Together with two other strangers, you can figure out your best path through Limgrave by quickly pinging landmarks, changing your pick to be closer, or confirming a teammate's choice by pinging their chosen location.

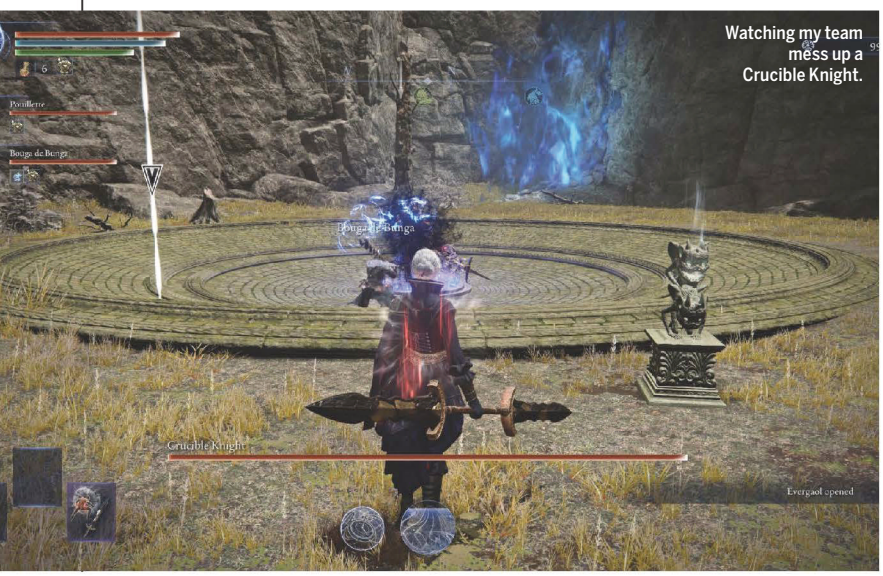
In one instance I was teamed with a couple of other players who all had different ideas. The first day was pretty horrid as everyone kept going off on their own, but after getting our asses handed to us we all took a different approach.

Without any words being shared between us we took turns pinging locations around the map that we wanted to visit, making sure each place was close to the last.

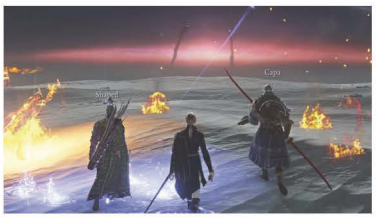
Starting the second day at only level 6 we went on an absolute rampage across all the army encampments, derelict monasteries, individual bosses, and defeated the Bell Bearing Hunter who lay under the fortress at the centre of the map.

It's refreshing to see how polite strangers can be in *Nightreign*, and how well teammates can work together, pointing out useful items, swapping weapons so that everyone has the best armament, and risking life and limb to revive one another. The camaraderie makes the pill of difficult and buffed bosses easier to swallow, without a doubt. ■

THE FIRST DAY WAS PRETTY HORRID AS EVERYONE KEPT GOING OFF ON THEIR OWN



Watching my team mess up a Crucible Knight.



LEFT: My team and I aura farming before the boss battle.

BELOW: Looking at the scary woods where we'll have to go next.

'*Crazy Taxi* but make it Deliveroo': the most dystopian *Yakuza* minigame.

"Teaches the value of drinking cup sake with middle-aged men"

Floral shirts and fond farewells in LIKE A DRAGON: INFINITE WEALTH

A recent study from the Survey Center on American Life reported that 15% of US men said they didn't have close friends in 2021, compared with 3% in 1990. In the same period, the number of men with 10 or more close friends decreased from 33% to 13%. It's become known as a 'friendship recession' – the sad, once-removed cousin of the male loneliness epidemic. And, without wishing to sound flippant, I think I have the solution. Play *Like A Dragon: Infinite Wealth*, a game that teaches the value of drinking cup sake with middle-aged men who really want you to be happy.

There's something inspiring about *Infinite Wealth*'s celebration of sincerity. The cast skews older than in most games, and it's refreshing to see a group of post-40 guys supporting each other. Kasuga and his crew are like a wholesome mirror to the dad at school gates who criticises your film taste/career choice/silicone sealant technique. It's mostly down to new series mainstay, Ichiban. He's essentially a labrador with a baseball bat. It's impossible to think of a character who's beaten more men unconscious yet still retains the sense he's a force for good.

MATT ELLIOTT

THIS MONTH
Contemplated growing old with a yakuza legend.

ALSO PLAYED
The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion Remastered

FEELING KOI

For the most part, it's a treat seeing him interact so closely with his forerunner, Kiryu, but it can be challenging. There's a sense of inevitable closure. Narrative spoilers aside, it feels like we're reaching the end of Kiryu's story. I wasn't into it at first: it felt like a mere novelty having Kiryu as part of Kasuga's crew. The *Yakuza* equivalent of AI Darth Vader in *Fortnite*. After a while, however, I realise it's not that at all. There's depth and purpose here, and Ichi's disarming effusiveness shows us a side of the Dragon of Dojima that we rarely get to see.

SHOWS US A SIDE OF THE DRAGON OF DOJIMA THAT WE RARELY GET TO SEE

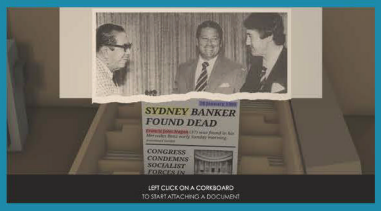
This alone is enough to make me love it. But once you throw in new characters and bring back established heroes from the first *Like A Dragon*, it starts to feel absurdly rich. Also, quite dangerously for a giant RPG, it's a game that I'm happy not to play. By which I mean that sauntering around Honolulu and playing darts is as distracting as the main story.

The location isn't quite as compelling as the grimy backstreets of Yokohama, but this, too, is the unique beauty of the series: the only game franchise where the fans clamour to go back to old locations, not new ones. But since I'm already feeling nostalgic about time spent in a pretend place with pretend people. ■

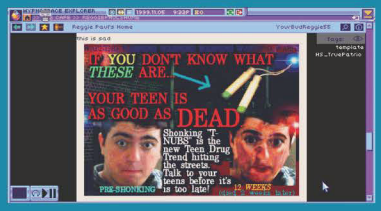
DATABASE DETECTIVE GAMES

Sterling students of the rabbit warren school of narrative design

By Jess Kinghorn



FAR LEFT: When you hear 'database' I'm sure your next thought is 'digital,' but *A Hand with Many Fingers* is pleasingly analogue and lo-fi.



Let's confront the soggy fish-lady in the room – yes, I have played basically all of Sam Barlow's FMV oeuvre. Though I enjoy *Telling Lies*' escalating betrayals, and *Immortality*'s big supernatural swings, *Her Story*'s murder mystery served 30 seconds at a time remains the most successful execution of the database detective formula.

The later Half Mermaid games feature minutes-long clips that in theory players will jump around and scrub through. However, in practice, the pacing grinds to a halt as I watch the entirety of a table read or one quiet side of a video call. The arbitrary time limit on *Her Story*'s seconds-long clips supports the investigative momentum better – however! Your investigative legwork tends to boil down to keyword searches and pressing play; though the question of how the puzzle pieces click together is always burbling away in your noggin', Barlow's live-action games are arguably quite passive experiences.

So, let me venture outside of the Half Mermaid paddling pool in search of other databases that better explain why I so love to stick my beak in. I've joked before that my brain is a mess of red string, so *A Hand with Many Fingers* giving you not one but two corkboards to criss-cross drew me in immediately.

As you work to uncover a conspiracy straight out of recent history, there's the creeping sense someone somewhere would much rather you reeled your beak in. Though not a horror game by any stretch, *A Hand with Many Fingers* makes the most of its limited presentation to gently prod at your paranoia – should you be worried about that car idling outside?

Don't get me wrong, I loved the corkboard family tree offered by *The Roottrees are Dead*, not to mention that game's multi-layered, actually helpful hint system. But there's something to be said for *A Hand with Many Fingers*' complete lack of, uh, hand-holding. It's also one database detective game that actually grapples with the malleability of the evidence you're amassing; I'll always remember cracking open an important box from the archives only to find it completely bare, a clear result of someone covering their tracks a little too well.

No Case Should Remain Unsolved explores this fragility a step further, tasking you with finding order among your protagonist's fragmented memory. You're presented with snippets of conversation about the disappearance of a child, all muddled up in terms of order or who even spoke the words.

Sifting through the initially disconnected mess constantly challenges your understanding of the case, and repeatedly forces you to re-evaluate details you'd previously taken for granted.

FANCY THREADWORK

I'd be remiss if I didn't at least mention *Hypnospace Outlaw*. Upon an alternate but no less crispy '90s internet, netizens no longer fight over the family desktop but instead don a techy headband to surf the web in their sleep. Between web-pages hosting tributes bookended by cringe GIFs, and a surprising number of conspiracy theorists terrified their Hypnos headbands are slowly turning their brains into beef, you're tucked into this funhouse mirror reflection of ye olde internet as a voluntary content moderator getting paid less than nothing. It goes about as well as you'd expect.

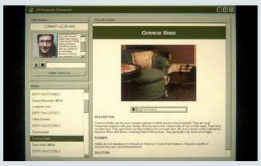
Netizens react to how you choose to heft your ban-hammer, with at least one unwitting copyright striker announcing their immediate departure from Hypnospace with an essay entitled 'Speaking my piece'. But it's not just this pretence of a reactive community that keeps me logged on – it's the alternate universe bangers. Between dad rock anthem Ready to Shave, and the frozen-over instrumentation of the Cool Punk genre, music is used as a wonderful worldbuilding tool.

I can't get enough of how *Hypnospace Outlaw* uses nostalgic soundfonts to project a playfully warped reflection of an internet I sort of remember. And that's what database detective games are all about: disappearing down a rabbit hole, and ending up somewhere totally unexpected. ■

UNUSUAL SUSPECTS

Recommended investigations

ANALOGUE: A HATE STORY
Chiller about an abandoned ship, and two onboard AI assistants to help you unravel the mystery.

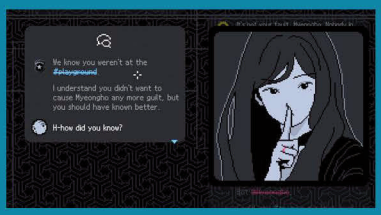


HOME SAFETY HOTLINE
Is it mice? Is it bed bugs? No, it sounds like a supernatural entity you've inadvertently pissed off.

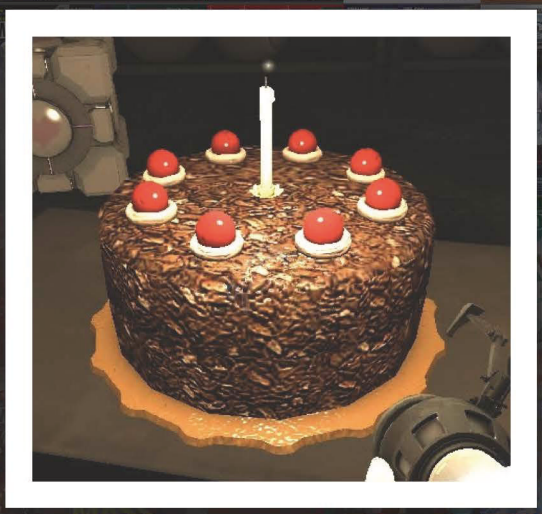
NOT FOR BROADCAST
Rather than poring over archival material and scrubbing through clips, you're doing it all live.

ALAN WAKE 2
Though I was left wanting more from its gameplay, this mystery remains a real page turner.

BARLOW'S LIVE-ACTION GAMES ARE ARGUABLY QUITE PASSIVE EXPERIENCES


We know you weren't at the
I understand you didn't want to cause Myeongho any more guilt, but you should have known better.
H-how did you know?

LEFT: Alright, I confess! I'm guilty as charged, your honour.



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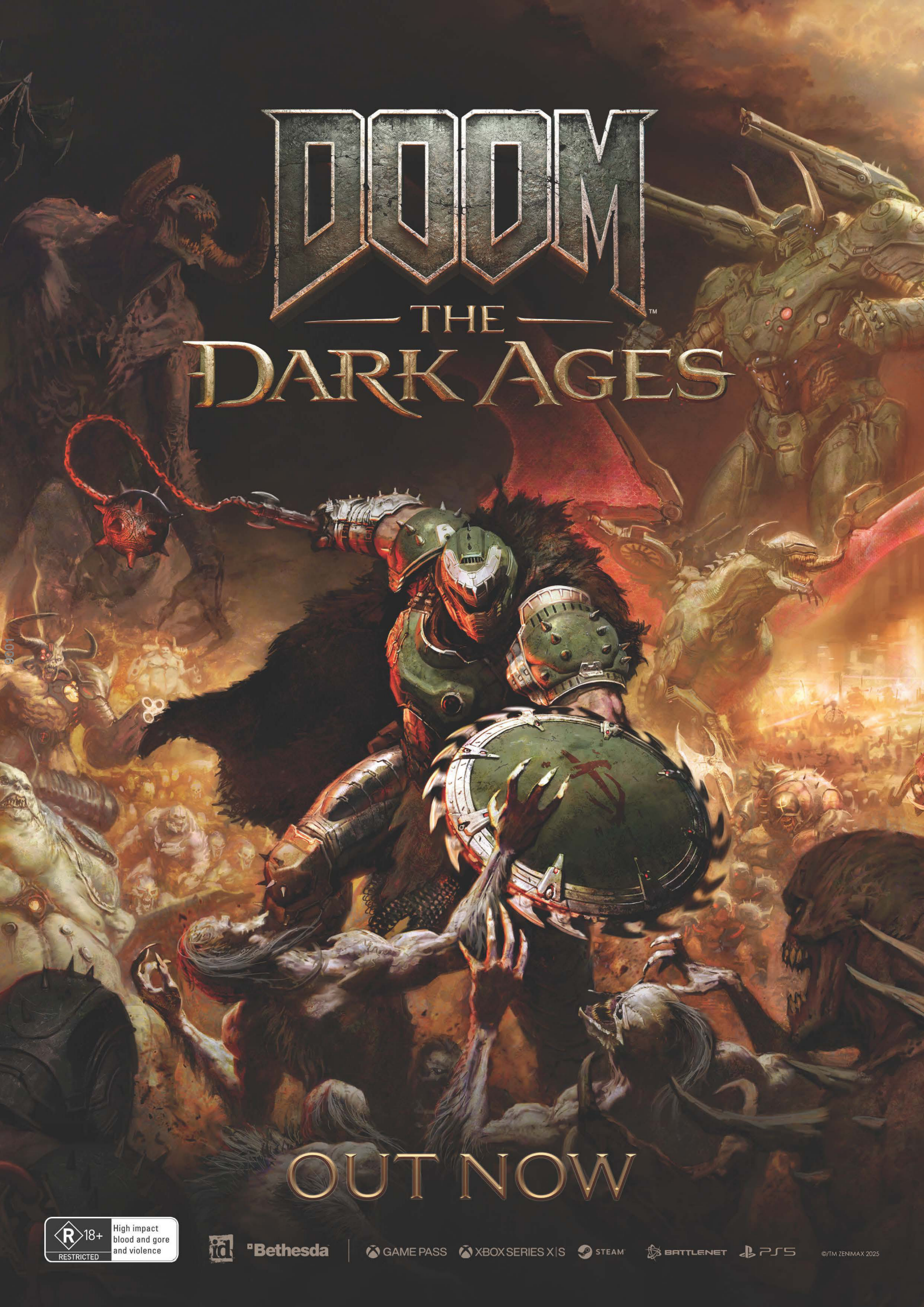
DOOM
THE DARK AGES
OUT NOW
R 18+
RESTRICTED
High impact blood and gore and violence
id
Bethesda
GAME PASS
XBOX SERIES X|S
STEAM
BATTLENET
PS5
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